A Serviceable Villain

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Bowing Among the Titans (March 2002)

I.

Before they named a torture technique after him, before the Church Commission report tarnished him forever in the public imagination, before he was indicted posthumously on charges of crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court in the Hague, there came unto Dr. Sidney Gottschalk a feeling of great easefulness, as if there was little to be expected from this life and, therefore, nothing to be disappointed about when failure was the payment for decades of work.

“I think this situation will resolve itself,” ten-year-old Sidney said to his mother, Gerde, on one of those clichéd sweltering summer Depression-era days when both had been directed at gun point to press their face to this saving-and-loan’s cool marble floor.

By “this situation” Sidney perhaps meant something more than the situation of being taken hostage while a bank heist was under way.

“It doesn’t bother me as much as it bothers you, this situation,” he told his mother in a whisper (though both had been directed to keep quiet under penalty of death). In fact, Sidney wasn’t worried about all that would happen to him. He wasn’t completely fearless in the face of death, but he wasn’t so fearful as to stop talking. He assumed eventually the bank heist would be complete and that would be that. The robbers had no real interest in killing either of them, he didn’t think. He assumed as long as it all went smoothly, they would be in no danger at all.

In the pockets of his corduroy knickers that his mother had picked out specifically for this sojourn, Sidney had the ten-dollar bill that was given to him for his tenth birthday. He had brought it to this savings-and-loan to make a deposit.

“When they come by,” Sidney said to Gerde in as low a voice as he could use and still be heard, “explain to them that I’m broke. You can tell them you’re broke, too,” he said. “You explain it in such a way that makes me out to be just like them. You give them everything you have if you want,” he said. “But don’t let them on to me. You explain that I’m somebody down on my luck too, just like them, just like a soup line bum.”

Prior to walking around the bank’s corner to empty out the till, the bank robbers had asked their hostages in voices increasingly insistent for the valuable contents of their pockets.

“Silver watch with a second hand that’s broke,” one of the robbers said to all. He was announcing his tally as he moved from one supine body to the next. “Here’s two goddamned buffalo nickels that if I rub ‘em together I get a dime.”

When Gerde asked through her eyes alone why Sidney would take such a risk for them both (as she would never let them take him without first offering herself), Sidney Gottschalk attempted a shrug while both shoulders were pinned to the floor. It appeared like he was attempting the breaststroke.

“Because it’s mine, ma,” he told her eventually. “I’m a man just like them,” he said. “I ain’t scared of them. Just like they ain’t scared of me.”

A Polish woman in a babushka next to Sidney was crying softly. This was in between reciting the *Ave Maria*.

“*Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum*,” the Polish woman whispered/moaned. Afterwards, she seemed surprised to receive a kick in the head from one of the robber’s hole-ridden Florsheims.

The robber didn’t seem amused by the woman’s effervescent desire for salvation. He seemed intent on netting as much lucre for himself as possible. He saw her religiosity as an impediment. This appeal to the Mother of God seemed to him counterproductive. In that he, not

the Madonna, was the ultimate authority figure now. It seemed to him that she wasn't paying close enough attention.

Just like his two cohorts emptying the tills on the other side of the counters, the tallying robber's identity was hidden from view by a Little Orphan Annie Halloween mask of the sort that you could send away for by filling out a form on the back of the *Reader's Digest*.

"*Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Iesus* ," the robber said to the Polish woman, finishing the prayer for her. Then he gave her another kick in the cranium, gentler this time as if he felt at some level a lesson had been learned.

"Don't you know where you are, sis?" he said to her. "Don't you know enough not to monkey with a man who can make a monkey out of you?"

Absent an identifying face with its attendant expressive muscle groups, the robber was inscrutable. Sidney couldn't tell how sincere he was about this incipient threat. It all came out as an oracular drone as if an entity above human was speaking it. His spirit had fled from the voice because of the mask he was wearing. Or rather his spirit had been liberated by it. Presently it was girding the robbers' words with absolute meaning as if an angel were speaking to them absent of a corporeal form.

Sidney Gottschalk would not be surprised to have peeled the paper mask back to reveal no underlying face at all. Maybe the robber's face was another mask to be discarded and so forth ad infinitum. Or maybe it was simply a blank area, a simple void whose momentary apprehension would cause all men to lose their minds in an instant.

"We do not see any redeemable quality in you," the tallying robber said to the Polish woman. Or rather the Little Orphan Annie mask said this to her using the robber's voice, having absconded with it temporarily. This was Sidney Gottschalk's great revelation. It was earned while pressing his forehead onto the bank's marble floor. He saw through the emptiness of personality, of the lie of individuality. He realized individual people as interchangeable parts. He saw that

they were fleshy dolls that one could do anything one wanted with, regardless if one was on the right side of the law in the endeavor.

The turnip bag that the tallying robber was carrying with him in the same hand as his revolver was jangling as he walked. It was filled with the treasure he had taken from the bank's patrons. He had a lot of spare change in there bumping up against the silver flask that the bank's unarmed security guard had been sipping from when they had first entered through the double doors. Not a lot of greenbacks in there to act as a buffer for the clinking coinage. The depression was in full swing by now. And few were willing to part with what little they had.

There was somebody's glass eyeball rolling around in the turnip bag's bottom that a wise guy had donated on his own without it having been demanded of him.

"Phooey on all of you," the robber had said upon finding the eye inside the bag. He kicked the nearest prone body to him. Nevertheless, he didn't bother to remove the eye. Maybe it was made of porcelain and could be hocked for something of value later. Maybe it could be worn on a necklace like the canine tooth of a slain lion that the bwana at the end of a Hemingway story had taken to doing.

This wasn't a very humorous or imaginative lot when it came to the spoils of pillaging. On the other hand, let's face it, even when beset with tough times the best and the brightest had not taken to robbing banks.

Sixty-eight years later, Dr. Gottschalk was able to recall the entire scene with perfect clarity to his biographer, Rob George, and wonder offhand why the robbers had bothered rousting the bank patrons at all.

"It is a simple and deadly equation of which they needed to be aware," Sidney said through scratched vocal cords to Rob during one elongated interview in Gottschalk's home in Arlington, Virginia. "There was the amount of money to be stolen," he said, "divided by the time it took to gather it. The rousting of the customers, therefore, was simply a vindictive maneuver to no great end," he said to Rob and brushed lightly at the glass eye of his own that he had recently acquired as a result of an excision of a malignant tumor at the base of his right

optic nerve. “They did it because they liked it, in other words. That was the kind of men they were. They were cruel as a matter of fun and leisure.”

It should be mentioned that the sort of cancer Sidney had contracted was of an exceptionally rare variety, but this was another story for another time. Somehow the contracting of such a rare malady was half-expected by Sid. He had over the decades come to believe that he was laboring under some type of curse. Strange things happened to him routinely. He didn’t believe in the existence of any supernatural force specifically. But somehow the universe had made up its mind about him long ago. He didn’t know how he had managed to stay alive this long.

By Sidney’s reckoning, the tallying robber with the turnip bag had absconded with at most thirty dollars’ worth of merchandise from the bank’s captive patrons.

“They were amateurs, and they were cruel men, and I found those attributes fascinating when combined,” he said to Rob when asked by him why this memory was still so vivid for him. “More than their cruelty I always wondered what drove them to such dangerous acts,” he said. “Even with this heist they couldn’t have possibly raised their standard of living demonstrably. Maybe for them it was all a question of sport,” he told Rob George. “Maybe for them the money was simply a pretext for engaging in acts routinely associated with psychopathic personalities. The money was secondary to them. They viewed it as a kind of bonus.”

On his second pass by the praying woman, for example, the robber with the turnip bag had pressed the end of his revolver against the Polish woman’s silently moving lips.

“If you can say three Hail Mary’s coherently in English with my gun in your mouth,” he told her, “And if you don’t mispronounce a word, I will pronounce you saved,” he said. “At which point you will be free to go. Somebody else in here will not be free to go, somebody else will be taken out back in the alley and shot in the eye,” the robber said. “There is no need to look around and think about who it will be,” he told her. “Likely it will be you if you do not bend to my will,” he said. “*Hail Mary*

full of grace," he told the Polish woman trying to get her started just in case she forgot the words. Or never knew them in the first place. By this time, she was starting to choke against the intruding barrel. Briefly she stared at young Sidney Gottschalk. But his eyes had gone dead as the black spaces in the robbers' Little Orphan Annie masks. He was one of them now. And all parties had been unaware of this change until now.

From his spot on the couch Rob George fidgeted once he heard this admission from Dr. Gottschalk.

"Would you say," he asked Sidney, "this was the first time your psychopathy was made known to you?"

Having used the word on frequent occasions to describe himself, Dr. Gottschalk was not prepared to take issue with the word *psychopathy* when it was applied to him. It was a clinical term, nothing more. It may or may not have been applicable in his case, but it was used routinely. He wasn't offended by it even though it was likely incorrectly applied. He wasn't a psychopath so much as a psychopath-aspirant. He wanted to be able to kill as freely as the famed serial killers of America but some tough, yet invisible membrane always held him back. This was why he had gotten involved in politics, to use the machinery of the state to accomplish what the John Wayne Gacy's of the world could accomplish on their own, easefully as dreaming. Secretly, despite all his psychiatric training, he felt it a compliment. His great failing in life he felt was his bourgeois fealty to social norms. He wanted to kill and perhaps cannibalize with impunity. But he was too much of a coward to set his inner Gacy free.

He hesitated before answering the question. The journalist had struck a nerve and he wanted to compose himself before replying.

"Depends on what you mean," he finally said, "by *made known*. Symptoms related to personality disorders are generally presented to others rather than the individual. How is something that always has been a part of you ever be made known to you? Can he who is nearsighted ever declare himself nearsighted absent of a clinical definition? Does the symptom have a will of its own? Can it announce itself on a premeditated

timetable? Or is it discovered piecemeal over decades through the objective analysis of facts by a disinterested professional? But do such creatures exist anymore? Is an objective accounting of a subjective state possible in this degraded age? Or are we all just actors playing various roles and there is no such thing as a fundamental psychological reality? Rob, do you know?"

According to Sidney Gottschalk, a man's true self was never discovered so much as it was admitted to in a court of law. Over the decades, a man grew progressively tired of living a lie. When he finally confessed there was no corresponding epiphany because what he was confessing to was a goddamned lie. So, if Rob George was asking Sidney to confess, he ought to rephrase the request. As it stood the request was too squishy, too shot through with religious notions as it was presently phrased. A truthful man did not, according to Sid Gottschalk, discover something about himself. Ever. Because, you see, the absence of truth was always self-evident to he who had lived his life absent of blinders. He was (or at least should have been) embarrassed not to have admitted such things to himself from the outset.

Sid Gottschalk was merely (and for the longest time indifferently) a man devoid of real empathy for the suffering of others. Just as he was compelled by some inner force to be the cause of that suffering. As if having been humanity's victim in a former life set him on a course of blanket revenge against the entirety of mankind. Kill 'em all, so to speak, and let God sort them out later. That might be what a psychopath thought, but, truthfully, Sid Gottschalk never felt like a psychopath. He felt more like an individual who strode through life defiantly.

"I thought he was funny," was all he would say to Rob George about the robber with the turnip bag. More specifically, he found it amusing the way the robber didn't seem to have a real plan about his role in the heist. The arbitrary cruelties he rendered against the Polish woman would surely cause his gang to be apprehended if he had drawn it out long enough for a beat cop to walk by the storefront window and look inside. Also, Sidney thought the Little Orphan Annie

masks were funny. They had cold black ovular eyes just like the cartoon character. It was difficult to say how well the robbers saw out of them. It was difficult to say if their use was intended as a comment on their own soulless nature or if they were just the cheapest disguises available. Deep down the robbers likely had no poetry in them. Likely they lacked the self-awareness to portray themselves as the empty vessels that they were.

Rather than admit curiosity over the robbers' true identities, Sidney Gottschalk would, over the course of the ensuing months, obsess over the masks themselves and the inherent possibilities such devices held in his chosen field of endeavor. He wanted to become the popularizer of the mask as a tool in psychotherapy. He wanted to wear a mask himself during psychoanalytic sessions. He wanted to establish the soul as just another mask worn by those too neurotic to face the truth of human existence.

"One looks beneath the mask and discovers a face," was how he put it to Rob when asked exactly what attracted him to the artifice. "Just as one looks beneath the face and discovers another mask. It is staring out at one ignorant of its provisional nature."

There was a hidden mask within, he said, that conformed to the superficial mask of the body. This was a common conceit in many primitive cultures (but disremembered by the West with its attendant religious dogmas). The psychiatric profession needed to be purged completely of religious notions in Sidney's view. This had been made clear to him once he was face down on the bank's marble floor. The mask was never removed subsequent to an attempt to create a disguise. The robbers might as well have left them on permanently. There was no moment of revelation that occurred when they came off.

"The first thing I did when I got home," Sid told Rob George, "Was dig in the magazine rack and try to find the appropriate order form that I once recalled seeing. I wanted to buy my own Little Orphan Annie mask and wear it around the house," he said. "I would wear it for days without taking it off. I wanted to surprise my mother with it while she was climbing out of the shower.

I wanted to use it on my school chums and blacken their eyes if they gave me any guff about it and called me a girl for wearing it."

Dr. Gottschalk had vague plans of carving the same snub-nosed thirty-eight the robbers used out of Ivory Soap and staining it black with shoe polish. He would stick it in his friends' mouths then and ask them to recite the Ave Maria backwards.

In those days there was no psychological counselling offered to victims of bank heists.

"We were all considered innocent bystanders," Sid told Rob, whose eyes of late had wandered outside the living room's bay window. A large man with a crew cut in a black suit was taking giant strides up and down Dr. Gottschalk's cobblestone driveway. It was hard to tell by his demeanor if he was on the public payroll. Sidney surely wouldn't reveal such potentially classified knowledge to Rob. Dr. Gottschalk still had many friends in government. But, then again, he had been persona non grata around Langley since the G.H.W. Bush Administration began to settle old scores with various non-compliant personnel. Rob George didn't know how far goodwill extended in the world of clandestine operations. He didn't know if there was such a thing as goodwill at all in the spy game.

Perhaps this large man was a representative of a private security firm. If this was the case, one had to wonder who exactly Sidney had been afraid of. Private security ran to three thousand dollars a week at least. Gottschalk wasn't for all his troublesome personality quirks somebody with an irrational fear of the unknown. He was cunning. He generally didn't see enemies where no enemies were.

Perhaps the recent terrorist attack on both the World Trade Center and on the Pentagon had unnerved Dr. Gottschalk to such an extent that he felt the need to act. Rob George could detect the pistol holstered within the black-suited man's jacket by the slight distortion in his left arm swing as he walked. This trick Sidney Gottschalk revealed to Rob George during their first meeting. He had also revealed to him the way you could tell if a person was lying with one hundred percent accuracy.

This was to check the eyes for a slight upward shift just before whoever it was gave you an answer.

Back in 1933, of course, both techniques were unknown. This was because law enforcement saw itself more in the business of the physical intimidation of prospective criminals than the business of solving crimes.

“They didn’t perform a real investigation, they didn’t dust for fingerprints even,” Sidney said to Rob of the local gendarmes of Connecticut who finally answered the call ten minutes after the robbers had fled in their ‘28 Packard. “They put out an APB that described the three as wearing Little Orphan Annie masks,” he said. “Wearing the masks,” he said. “As if they had been grafted on to their faces and couldn’t be removed even by a surgeons’ scalpel. They didn’t see that it was their purview to be even mildly clever,” Sid told Rob George. “To them it was all in a day’s work. Bank heists happened all the time during the Depression. The FDIC was still in its infancy in those days, so the government was not liable for the loss. And nobody got hurt, according to them. So, what was the big deal?”

The Polish woman, according to Sidney, was inconsolable after the fact and had to be removed from the bank’s floor by a stretcher after she was dosed with enough sodium pentothal to have her reveal the number and occasion of every abortion that had been performed on her. It seemed an unnecessary diversion to make for somebody who was a victim in the purest sense. But the mindset even then had changed little from Puritan times. They treated helpless people awfully back then. And if you could barely speak English, they treated you even worse.

According to Sid Gottschalk, and without providing attribution as to how he knew, the woman had the pregnancy terminated as a perverse directive of a staunchly Catholic upbringing where single motherhood was viewed as less an alternative lifestyle than sinfulness incarnate.

“I actually saw her again on the occasion of my first residency, believe it or not,” he said to Rob brightening

somewhat as the coincidence was recalled. To him what was about to be related was a happy memory.

"St. Elizabeth's hospital 1946, on the psychiatric ward," he said. "A lot of damage to her arms and legs. Mostly because of her using some impromptu method of self-flagellation. It might have been a power cord to an electrical icebox she had hacked off in one of the wealthy people's homes she had cleaned for a living," Sidney said. "Don't know. I wasn't the attendant physician on this case. I'm making assumptions where hard facts likely are required," he said. "But to judge by the wounds' depth it was definitely something thick and metallic. It was the leather whip her parish priest used on himself at night for impure thoughts. It wasn't a plastic strap she might have pulled off the handle of the cable car that took her to work most days."

She never made it out of St. Elizabeth's needless to say, at least not on her own two feet. In the winter of that year another first-year resident arrived at the hospital who had studied under Walter Freedman, the father of the lobotomy. She then received the conventional treatment for somebody in her socio-economic class and psychological predicament. And she was never able to go back to work again.

By the time she made it to St. Elizabeth's, her front teeth had been pulled in such a way that a barrel of a snub-nosed thirty-eight would fit in the space created perfectly. This set Sid to wondering if the missing teeth were an effect of an impoverished life devoid of dental care or if she had pulled them herself on a whim with the same pliers they had discovered in her possession upon the occasion of her original involuntary commitment at the advent of World War Two.

"Back in those days they didn't have serious concerns with the rights of the mental ill," Sidney said to Rob George and took up the opened vial of liquid morphine that he had been sipping from at ten-minute intervals all throughout this speech. Hard for Rob to say how much of morphine he had sipped while in his presence, but he assumed he was using more than the recommended dose. Being stricken in this way freed a man of his inhibitions. But Rob believed that Sid would

have ignored his doctors' prohibitions regardless. Especially if his prognosis was so dire that nothing could be done for him, he would steer the course he wanted. It was just his way. He didn't look to authority figures for guidance.

Upon first seeing the Polish woman in St. Elizabeth's, Dr. Gottschalk had resolved to learn her name.

"Never did manage to look in on her," he said to Rob then with his usual creaky difficulty stood up and walked into the other room. Of course, he wasn't sorry about this. But here was another factoid for the pile. Eventually Rob George would have to make something of this. He would have to psychoanalyze Sidney to the point that this omission made sense.

He hadn't excused himself as was his standard practice when talking to strangers. It was a truly informal relationship he had established with his biographer. He felt no compunction to apologize to Rob about any behavior on his part.

Perhaps it was the morphine he was swallowing that made him loose like this. Perhaps he had grown sufficiently indifferent to Rob George's presence that he felt little need to engage in the usual social graces with him. But in a larger way Rob could tell he was being fucked with. Gottschalk seemed determined to get him to react in some way. He wanted to put him on edge for some reason. He wanted to let him know who was in charge.

After ten minutes sitting alone, Rob George pondered if this absence meant that they were done for the day. If this was the case maybe he should visit the black-suited security officer in the driveway and smoke a cigarette with him. Rob wouldn't have minded a cancer stick just then. Maybe he should snap to it before the option was taken away.

Dr. Gottschalk returned just before Rob George had decided to stand.

"Help me a little bit with this," he said to George feigning a buckling of the knees. He placed the cardboard box he was carrying on the coffee table. It weighed less than ten pounds but held in Sidney's bony arms the package was unsteady. It was unsteady and

caused him a great deal of physical distress when he had borne its weight. Once rid of it, Sid Gottschalk sank back onto the couch and began to dart his eyes around in search of his morphine bottle. He had likely left it at the foot of the attic stairs that had been surmounted minutes before. There was nothing to do now but go back for it or bear the pain. But in his weariness, he had lately lost the desire to do either. He didn't have a real motivation to fix himself any longer. He would go on like this until roused to go on in another manner. It was a self-resolving situation. There was nothing he had to do to make it so.

It had not gone unnoticed by Dr. Gottschalk that his request for help had been ignored by Rob George altogether until it had been too late to be of any real service.

"I think you'll find something of value in there for us both," Sidney said to Rob just after he had recovered sufficiently to do so. He spilled the contents of the box onto the coffee table and floor.

He had a story to tell Rob just before his body failed him and he was done for the day. He wanted to show rather than tell for propriety's sake. He didn't want to get halfway through an explanation and have to lay his head on a pillow until his mind cleared enough for him to continue.

The box contained several dozen vintage masks in various states of disrepair relative to their placement in the box.

"My collection stretched back to 1935," Dr. Gottschalk said. "Some of these I sent away for and some of these arrived naturally so to speak as if born aloft on a summer wind. The Lone Ranger mask, I think you will agree, is the one you will be most familiar with," Sid said to Rob and carefully tried it on. "But there are so many others that you're free to try on at your whim," he said to Rob. He squinted through the mask using his single functioning eye. "They reveal something about me, I would say, that ordinary words don't. They mark me as somebody with a certain outlook on matters even though it might not be so obvious to you staring at them now."

Housed in the Lone Ranger mask Sidney Gottschalk's usually imperious gaze seemed markedly diminished. As if a good deal of the contempt he held for the world was filtered out by its presence.

"I'm not seeing you as you see me," he said to Rob George and squinted. "I'm not conceiving of you as above me in any way. In the way perhaps you might now be thinking of me."

Rather than perceive, the fake glass eye of Sidney's merely glimmered back through the mask's hole seeming to twinkle as its surface reflected unexpectedly what the masks' still attached sequins seemed to reflect into it. He wasn't sophisticated enough with his fashion sense for this effect to be intentional. But it was strange, nevertheless. As if he was engaging in a perpetual wink. Some strange doll-like effect had descended on his face as a result. And it was far too creepy to ignore.

"I am a mask collector," he told George, "Only one who is devoid of every collector's emotionalism regarding the objects he collects. I am in every way an unintentional poet. I am struggling mightily to render a metaphor. This was why I sought you out to begin with," he said to Rob George. "You are to help me with the phrasing. I've never had an effective way with words. Thoughts and actions truly but never a way with the words that objectify them for the world to see."

The mask he prized most, he said, was the one he made himself when in the summer of 1970 for a very brief time it seemed his life was at end.

"It's right here," he said to Rob. "The plainest and, therefore, the most shambolic."

The mask he was pointing to had fallen from the coffee table onto the cherry wood floor. It was just a circular bit of stained linen. It was just large enough to cover a face completely.

"This," he said to George, "was the one I had on at the darkest moment in my life."

He said it so wistfully as to make it sound untrue. And anyway, Rob George wasn't in the mood to take the bait.

The darkest moment in my life.

But to a man like Sid who was reputed to lack a soul, darkness was an entirely relative modifier. He wanted Rob to follow up with questions, to deceive him further.

However, unlike the Birdman of Taos, New Mexico, Rob George wasn't somebody so amenable to Dr. Gottschalk's manipulations as to be considered his de facto slave. Rob would be Sid's unintentional agent of reform simply because his judgment of him would be made by the facts alone. There was no real agenda with George as far as this project went. He assumed the relevant facts once they were recorded would judge Dr. Gottschalk appropriately. He assumed there would be no massaging of the truth necessary. This wasn't a vanity project obviously, not some ghost-written celebrity memoir designed far more to perpetuate a personal myth than destroy one.

On the inside of one especially gruesome mask that was based on a bust of a syphilis sufferer in late-stage decay resided a fraying tag. On the tag was written in surpassingly tiny script: *To Sid, from Joe* "*il miglior fabbro*" Tuskegee, Alabama 1949.

"It's all yours this one," he said to Rob George and held the white mask up to him as if demanding that he fasten it on his face. "Wear it in good health."

Rob George would recall later that it was the first time he had seen Dr. Sidney Gottschalk smile while in his presence. He was having a good time suddenly. He was having a good time being the cipher he had forced himself to become over the span of so many interlocking decades.

II.

The bodyguard's name was Jim Kane. He was understandably reticent about revealing the name of his employer to Rob George.

“If I told you,” he said to Rob, quoting the familiar joke of the intelligence community, “I would have to kill you.”

Jim had an earpiece dangling from his right lapel that according to him played nothing but gangsta rap when it was inserted inside his ear. He had a smile that revealed a certain amount of fresh dental work. Maybe he had fallen into a little bit of money because of this assignment. Dr. Sidney Gottschalk received credible death threats daily from all sides of the political spectrum. Guarding him must surely be considered an elite assignment. He didn’t seem to Rob to be a trained killer slumming as an old man’s protector. Perhaps this was an example of tradecraft at its most refined. Or maybe Kane was just a moonlighting cop. Maybe he was one of Sid Gottschalk’s former co-workers trying his best to return a favor before it was too late.

He seemed to have no interest in answering Rob George’s questions. Rob couldn’t help finding this suspicious, given Dr. Gottschalk’s cloak-and-dagger background.

“He’s a shadowy figure, isn’t he?” Rob said to Jim of Sid. “I hear stories from him routinely that would curl the hairs on the back of your neck then straighten them out again.”

“I’m looking forward to reading what you’ve written,” Jim Kane said to him smiling broadly. As if he genuinely was.

Rob George said, “Don’t you wonder why a retired physician is in need of a bodyguard?”

“Bodyguard,” Jim Kane said and smiled. “Who said he has a bodyguard?”

“If you have a need to talk, I’m available 24/7,” Rob George and began to fish around in his blue jeans pocket for his card.

“Won’t be necessary,” Jim Kane said. “Because you wouldn’t be so interested to hear what I have to say.”

“Why’s that?” Rob asked.

“It’s all so boring,” Jim said to him and began to flex the impressively defined muscles in his neck. “A bunch of old laundry lists and so forth. It attracts you and others to it only because it is unknown. But once it is

known, once it becomes yesterday's news, it immediately loses its allure," he said. "It's just like anything," he said. "You think you want to know certain truths, but you don't really. Because you will burrow down into the core of all these truths and realize there's nothing's to them. Because there's a shoddiness certainly to the men who created them. And you realize you were better off not knowing anything about them to begin with. They were simple urban legends until you placed your dirty fingers on them. And now all of a sudden they're beyond redemption. And rendered completely boring by you."

Such nattering seemed like so much counterintelligence doublespeak to Rob George. Jim was trying to suggest something about the nature of his knowledge but had done so vaguely enough to suggest that the knowledge wasn't worth knowing. Indirectly, Jim was telling Rob to dig deeper into the nature of Jim's presence on Sidney's Gottschalk's driveway. But in doing so he had intimated that there would only be dead ends met. He didn't know the value of Kane's testimony. He wouldn't know likely even if the testimony was sworn to and corroborated.

Whatever Kane said to him ultimately would be a series of polished half-truths in service of a campaign of deception. It wouldn't be worth wading through the muck of the disinformation to reclaim those little bits that could be woven into the story later. He assumed Kane barely knew Sidney apart from his assigned duties. He assumed that he was too low level an operator to have any true knowledge about the Company secrets that Sidney kept. He assumed the documents containing that knowledge had been burned before he was born.

Kane's presence in the driveway it seemed to Rob might have been a counterintelligence plant. The goal all along was to provide false testimony and co-opt the entire biography. Jim Kane had nothing truthful to say but he was eager to say it. He was far less trustworthy than Sid himself. Which was saying a great deal considering Rob believed Sid incapable of telling the truth even if motivated to do so.

“The fact that Kane declared himself to me so conspicuously only reinforces my suspicion of him,” Rob George said to his editor, Valery Song, once he was back in his hotel. Valery was also his ex-wife. “He’s CIA probably masquerading as private security,” Rob said. “He wants me to get to know him so that I can be fed all sort of disinformation. One untrue fact and the book will be discredited. They’ll use the establishment media to crucify me and that’ll be that. But the truth’s out in the open, Val. I have all these tapes of the man himself. And even Gottschalk wouldn’t be so perverse as to try and discredit everything in his own biography.”

He had originally only planned to spend two weeks with Sidney and use electronic means to conduct the remainder of his research. But he had abandoned this plan after only three days. It wasn’t that his subject was being reticent, it was just that so many of his responses required a further explanation. So that a face-to-face interview was necessary to even partially understand a given answer. Sidney Gottschalk was fiercely articulate, but he was at such an emotional disconnect from his own beliefs that the true depth of feeling for a given subject was only revealed non-verbally, almost through pantomime and sometimes minutes after the question was answered. The stunt with the masks this afternoon was a perfect example of that: wherein some piece of himself was being offered to Rob but in such an obtuse way that it would have been impossible to capture remotely. It seemed that Sidney needed to read Rob’s body language before speaking of himself in a truly honest way. He was closed emotionally in the familiar way of the American overclass, wherein any sort of human interplay was seen in terms of commerce strictly. He wanted a fair price for laying himself bare. He was engaging in a dangerous practice and wanted some type of emotional commitment from Rob. Working from home most of the time, therefore, would prove impossible.

Ruminating on Jim Kane’s meaty presence and also on the white linen mask now crinkled up in his pocket like a used hankie, Rob George had decided that their nearly simultaneous appearance into his notes wasn’t a coincidence. He was being fucked with in a very forward

way, he decided, by both men. He was the victim of a psychological experiment undertaken absent of his consent.

Because of this, he had deep empathy for that score of poor devils who had encountered Dr. Gottschalk over the decades. He was making a list of these unfortunates independent of Sidney. He felt the need to place their testimonies in the book even if they diverged from the book's master narrative. He felt a moral obligation to do so and assumed at worst that it would make fodder for another book that Valery would help him with down the road. He doubted the Gottschalk biography would sell vigorously. It was far too dark and relentlessly focused on the grotesqueries of America's counterintelligence dealings. Its protagonist was far too invested in the fabrications that allowed these counterintelligence operations to occur. Sid alone knew what really happened in America during the half century that he was at CIA. He would tell nobody because he realized a secret once revealed lost all its power and became just another limp factoid, a desiccated intellectual jellyfish washed up on the beach of public consciousness. He was the highest keeper of secrets in Washington and was determined to go to his grave holding that status. So, the biography's real purpose was to obfuscate rather than reveal. Rob George understood this before he had taken the job but just now, he was finding all the craftiness especially irritating. The interaction with Kane had been the last straw. He knew he was being used by all parties. During the call he asked Valery without irony if a biographer was entitled to sue his subject for not cooperating fully.

"I don't think any of them deep down know what's true anymore," he told her while sitting on his freshly made queen-sized bed. "They tortured the truth in their secret prisons long enough so that sometime in the sixties, say, it died. And once the truth died it was impossible to lie. But they're all sociopaths and will do anything to keep their high status. So, they're amid this ongoing con where they seduce the book-buying public. But all their important revelations are false revelations. And they have no greater grasp about what's going on

than the most disconnected conspiracy theorist constructing reality in his parents' basement like a goddamn Lego castle."

The mystery for Rob was why Dr. Gottschalk thought any of this tradecraft would work on him.

"I'm a fucking pro," he said to Valery Song. "Long ago, I set my bullshit detector to eleven and ripped the knob off. So, none of this stuff, this so-called tradecraft, is the worth the time it took to invent."

Even before he met Dr. Gottschalk, Rob had told him that he was incorruptible. Incorruptible in the sense that he was too much of a depressive to be fully seduced. He couldn't be fully seduced because deep down he didn't give a damn. Like many of his generation, he had given up on the promise of America long ago. He understood Gottschalk as a sociopath and was waiting to be proven different. Plainly, he had told Sid he would abandon the project altogether at the first sign that he was being coerced into writing a certain version of events, but this was a lie. He understood himself as a hack in the employ of sinister forces. He understood that America was irredeemably corrupt and that no amount of "truth-telling" could set the wrong right. America died sometime in the mid-seventies in a torture chamber in Santiago, Chile. Or even before that in a bioweapons manufacturing plant in Scotland. Every other narrative was deception, propaganda. But try as he might the real version of events would never out. Sidney Gottschalk was too practiced a liar for that. He needed ordinary men to believe how powerful he still was. Old and disgraced, he could only seduce through deception. But Rob George had no intention of playing along regardless of how much he was being paid.

He wasn't fucking made of warm clay despite what Sidney assumed. His wimpy veneer disguised a passive-aggressive core. Guys like Jim Kane with his bulging neck muscles and semiautomatic pistol intrigued him more than frightened him. At the end of the day Rob would do what was best for him solitarily. He was all alone in this world anyway. He had no other choice but to do exactly this.

The hundred- and forty-thousand-dollar advance Rob had received upon signing his book contract was locked in escrow until certain agreed upon project milestones were met.

“They want a proposal that has more flesh on it,” Valery told Rob, surmising the yet to be placed call from Lafayette Publishing’s vice-president to Rob himself days from now. “They’re nervous about the project’s slant,” she said. “About your take on history, given subsequent events. They might have wanted a hit piece on Gottschalk starting out but that’s no longer the case. Now, they don’t know what to make of him. Was he right and everybody else wrong? They don’t know what conclusions your readership will draw about him if you make the book overly critical of him. They know they don’t want a hit piece any longer and they’re leaving it to you to supply the nuances. So, they’re going to ask you at some point to put flesh on the skeleton. They’re going to refer you to their in-house lawyers if you tell them to fuck off which I already warned them that you will.”

The “flesh” creation that was needed from Rob George was simply not on the agenda.

Looking at it objectively, Rob wasn’t in a position to write a single truthful sentence about Sidney Gottschalk. He wasn’t able to do this because Sidney elided truth from his recounting just as one of his masks elided personal identity. Falsehood was his fundamental reality. But such a conceit was far too slippery to give life to within the confines of a traditional middlebrow biography. It would be that way throughout the span of the project. Gottschalk was simply too unknowable to be characterized in any single way. Rob would have to find a literary hook to hang the entire apparatus of Sid’s life from just like the skeleton in a biology classroom. Presently that hook was missing. Even this bit of biographical hackdom, that truth was stranger than fiction, was not available to him. There was nothing strange about Sidney’s recollections, because they were largely fictious. He presented clean, machine-tooled surfaces to the world. He had obviously thought a lot

about how he would present himself within Rob's presence.

On the other hand, Rob George was flat broke and wanted to play ball. In many ways he had seen this project as his last, best chance to breathe life into a flat-lining career.

"When he calls," Rob said to his ex-wife of Lafayette's vice-president, "I'll admit surprise. Then I'll ask what it is they need from me. It's what you want to hear me say to you and I'm saying it right now. I want to do anything to make the project a success. Grovel like a worm, whore myself to the highest bidder. Anything. I'm done with individual achievement of any stripe," he said. "I'm a team player in my old age. Whatever he wants me to write I will write. And, in the end, he will get the book that he desires, not the one any of us deserve."

It was weird how everything seemed to be going Sidney Gottschalk's way so suddenly, but Rob didn't sense any conspiracy behind this retreat by Lafayette. 9/11's smoke cloud over Turtle Bay had just cleared. Otherwise liberal New Yorkers were struggling with their feelings as regarded America's foreign policy transgressions. They couldn't bring themselves to fulsomely condemn the men who had kept America safe through the Cold War. All the old shibboleths uttered at 92nd Street Y lectures and Upper West Side get-togethers seemed suddenly built on sand, unstable as if preparing to collapse.

Liberals didn't know yet if the intellectual work should be to prop up America's foreign policy or destroy it. The view from outside Manhattan didn't register at all with them especially at Lafayette Publishing. They realized merely that New York was not the United States. That was the most really, that they had to say about the country presently. That they weren't part of it. They felt events beyond them utterly. They wanted to be protected from their countrymen and were manipulating this latest crisis to just this under the guise of public safety.

Rob didn't think the publishers wanted him to create a full-blown politicized defense of Dr. Sidney Gottschalk of the type the right wing apologist Fred Emerson had

just published on Wisconsin's junior senator of days gone by, Joseph P. McCarthy. Nevertheless, with their conference room within sight of what was now being called Ground Zero, the executives at Layfette Publishing had a vision of something more sympathetic than damning. They were gun shy merely, caught in a moment of historical turmoil where the winds of popular opinion were difficult to gauge. So, they were trying to hedge their bets editorially. Give 'em another year and they might have a different mindset. Certainly, Lafayette was not a radicalized company intent on overturning the public order. If the mass of men thought that the closest thing America had produced to Joseph Mengele, Dr. Sidney Gottschalk, was worthy of veneration, than the biography that Lafayette eventually published would say so, just not in so many words. The executives at Lafayette were whores after consensus, slaves to the received wisdom of the day emanate from Manhattan salons. Rob George knew this before going in. But they were virtually the only American publisher left who dealt in six figure advances. This was a professional endeavor he was engaged in. He and Valery Song had a child that required two thousand dollars a month in support payments from him. And assignments of late had tended to be running low.

The entire journalistic scene had changed in New York as far as he was concerned since the terror attacks on the World Trade Center in September. There was extraordinarily little questioning of government action any longer. The *New York Times'* articles that he had read about the attacks were mere rewrites of existing executive branch press releases. They were all caught up in the aftermath of the event. They were waiting for some direction to be provided. It didn't speak well to those who considered themselves independent sources of news. Just like Rob, they were too addicted to their paychecks to genuinely consider themselves independent of anything. The only difference between him and them was that at least he had the courage to admit this was the case and affirm the compromised nature of journalism at the twenty-first century's advent.

On CNN, which was unfortunately the station that his hotel room's TV defaulted to when it was turned on, a man was being shown plummeting from the World Trade Center's ninety-eighth floor for perhaps the hundred thousandth time since the horrific event occurred.

"What are you wearing anyway?" Rob said to Valery Song knowing how the question would anger her if only temporarily. He put the phone on the bedspread he was laying on momentarily and listened for an answer. He didn't want a back and forth with her. He didn't want to engage in one of these simmering catty exchanges that ex-couples engaged in when forced together through circumstance.

Strange that they were still working together post-divorce. But neither of them felt that they shouldn't. Their relationship was already ruined, so what was the harm? They had made a mistake in getting married because it ruined their working relationship. So why supplement one wrong decision with another? It would all end after Lafayette Publishing folded. At which time they would go their separate ways and communicate by email only about their daughter for the rest of their lives, however long that would be.

The bow-tied expert on physical trauma (as titled by the electronic CNN banner just below his bow tie) claimed that when a man was dropping to his death the only true feeling possible was that of supreme euphoria.

"The dopamine levels in the brain go off the chart," he said to CNN's anchor who had her nods synchronized to each pull on the bow tie. "And you have a feeling that you are communing with angels. There's no fear as the brain ceases to realize where it's at," he said. "It's given up, basically," the expert said. "It's ready to meet its maker or whatever you wish to call it a half second after making contact with the ground."

Not that this would necessarily be believed by anybody (because how would he even know?) but the reason he was saying it was interesting to Rob George on several levels.

"He's trying to reform suicide so that's it's a viable lifestyle alternative," Rob said to Valery who to her credit had hung up on him long ago. Rob leaned into the TV

from where he sat on the bed as if to bathe himself in the broadcast. He wanted to come to a better understanding of the expert's motivations. He felt the connection unconsciously, but he couldn't articulate what it was. In his conspiratorial mind frame, everything had taken place for a reason. Stars in other galaxies blinked on and off as a system of communication intended for him alone. Everything was connected for him, and he understood this mindset as being linked to a supreme derangement of the senses. He understood that he had entered the shallows of mental illness, but he didn't see a way out. The logic of paranoia was perfect that way. In that it reinforced its own conclusions. For now, he would have to ride the madness out. It would have to break on its own. Or Dr. Gottschalk would have to help him in this endeavor. He would have to be his guide through the maze that he had personally created for him.

He didn't feel a powerful desire to extricate himself from the situation as he sensed it would be better for the work if he believed himself to be at the center of some celestial conspiracy.

"It braces your days with a certain seriousness," Rob George said to a now vanished Valery Song. The alternative to conspiratorial beliefs was the belief that there were no real conspiracies at all. Which was to say, the embracing of a world view so nihilistic that it was hard to conceive how men who had believed in it managed to roll out of bed each morning. It would prove profoundly depressing and creatively debilitating to anyone who desired to see the connection between events. That is, anyone who desired to see existence as possessing any sort of meaning. Because all narrative was to an extent the proffering of conspiracy. The stories one told oneself unconsciously provided the undergirding of both science and philosophy. These were all false narratives as they were arbitrarily conceived. People made stories up about their surroundings constantly independent of verifiable data. This behavior was the soul of paranoia. People were constantly telling themselves lies to further a truth which was never valid to begin with.

Not that he thought he was poised enough to slide in and out of the paranoid state, but for the time being, before he was consigned to a rubber room, this state of knowing madness would work for him.

“So much to do,” Rob George said to himself upon waking from a ten-minute nap. He rose and sought the linen mask again. It had been momentarily discarded amongst a pile of worthless files Sidney Gottschalk had given to him on their first meeting as a gesture of signaling his openness. He knew it had been given as some sort of prod to further investigation of the mask’s origin. Sidney wanted to signal to Rob that he was aware of his essential nature, but he had chosen to do so through symbol alone. He was toying with Rob, but at the very least the attempt at revelation had meant something. The linen couldn’t be discarded with all the other brittle yellow pages describing the proper usage of suppositories for the alleviation of constipation amongst bed ridden catatonics. It wasn’t merely another bit of disinformation intended to deceive. It wasn’t a type of joke made at Rob George’s expense.

Rob had planned to stare at the white mask’s vacant recesses until it yielded clues.

“I think he used it to wipe his ass with it,” said this hotel’s concierge/drug dealer who nowadays went by the mononym Mars. Never having meant Sidney Gottschalk, Mars could not have known this. But he had some magic mushrooms to sell to Rob and he didn’t want to be distracted. Also, Mars wanted to alert Rob to the change in hotel policy concerning the acceptance of guest packages. No packages past twelve ounces would be signed for at the front desk from now on. Regardless of size, no package with any sort of perforation or tear in it would be accepted.

The linen mask was atop the made bed staring upwards at Mars and Rob.

“You can go ahead and throw it away,” Mars told Rob and dug around in his uniform for the shrooms. Quite possibly he had left them back in his bedroom. He hadn’t expected to make a sales call today, but fate had intervened in the form of domestic terrorism. All of Washington was presently on alert. 9/11 had turned

them all into paranoid freaks. And guests of the hotel were in constant need of reassurance.

According to Mars, news of a local postal worker made sick from a batch of powdered anthrax sent through the mail had caused hotel security to swing into action. Supposedly the anthrax was intended for the President of the United States. But a new policy needed to be put in place for all hotel residents regardless of their relationship to the Commander-in-Chief.

“It’s interesting how everything’s unravelling so quickly,” Mars said to Rob speaking in general terms. What did he mean by *everything* exactly? The staff at this Residence Inn had prided itself on being ahead of the curve when it came to protecting their guests. They prided themselves on the testimonies they received from satisfied customers throughout the world swearing to this establishment’s extraordinary level of service.

With one demonic letter the hotel had swung into action

“If they try and leave something there for us without being signed for,” Mars said of the new policy, “our directive is to throw it into the furnace as quickly as we might while it’s being held at arm’s length. They gave us a clamp on a pole and a mask with a HEPA filter so that we won’t have to touch or breathe in the emanations from the object,” he said. “There’s talk of getting us a full hazmat suit at some point. There’s an airtight metal container that they’re going to bolt underneath the desk where all these packages are supposed to be deposited. There’s a firm specializing in bio-hazard disposal that they have on call for twenty-four seven. Whenever the box’s lid is open there’s supposed to be a call that goes out automatically.

Hard to say which came first: the instinct for self-preservation or the fear that drove men on ceaselessly independent of reason.

“It’s a chicken and egg scenario as far as I’m concerned,” Mars commented and quickly rediscovered the baggie where he kept his mushrooms. It was in his jacket’s lapel pocket at all time sticking up like a silk handkerchief.

Quickly he began to hold each of the curlicue brownish shrooms up to available light as if he was a diamond merchant in search of a flaw.

“I don’t think offhand if you stuck a finger in their face and asked them yourself they’d be able to give you a firm answer, Mars said concerning the real need for such security measures.

Misanthropic to a fault, Mars’ real motivation for remaining as hotel concierge was to attempt to alleviate this tendency of seeing the worst in people through various self-abnegating acts.

“I’m not their good angel anymore, post-9/11,” he told Rob George of his clientele. By now Rob was spread out on the bed flipping through news channels.

“I’ve been given a direct order to reject their mail,” Mars said continuing to inspect his wares. “Now I’m somebody that they will see as just another pencil pusher who refused to come through for them in a pinch. The special relationship I had with them is now canceled. Which means they can advance to hating me. I don’t mind being hated,” Mars said “Merely, I just think its beside the point.”

So it seemed, indeed if this new hotel policy was going to be enforced, Mars would have to quit this job and return to his cloistered lifestyle in the Arlington townhouse he had purchased almost entirely with the proceeds he had earned from his drug dealing.

“It’s a lonely and desperate circumstance indulging your worst traits,” he told Rob George and took the opportunity to sample his own wares. He held a largish specimen under his tongue like a parishioner receiving the Eucharist. Unlike Rob, who viewed dosing himself as some sort of medical procedure, Mars was merely eager to get fucked up. He had tripped too many times by now for it to have been a novel experience. Absent of another human presence, Mars would gobble the mushrooms like they were gummi bears. They gave him the runs big time occasionally but that was part of the fun. He was bored at-root. Also, he was jaded and hateful. He aped the mechanics of human compassion all throughout the day and that was the best he could do regarding his own salvation. He faked niceness until it became second

nature for him. But even that avenue of human expression was being closed off to him.

Mars liked Rob George because he seemed to share certain misanthropic character traits with him. He had heard all about his Gottschalk project by now and wanted to assist in any way possible. He had grown increasingly interested in Sidney when the revelations about his participation in the acid soaked MKUltra project had been mentioned by Rob. Like many psychonauts, Mars viewed MKUltra with supreme interest. He himself was a MKUltra historian. He knew all about the San Francisco whore house where johns were routinely dosed. He knew all about the experiments concerning the dissemination of plague bacilli in the New York subways and the secret torture facilities scattered across Europe. Dr. Gottschalk to him was a God-like figure capable of any madness. Mars had come to see himself as an aide to Rob in understanding this part of Sid's story. He considered himself a self-taught expert in the field in the use and history of hallucinogenic substances. He had come to see himself as somebody who could help Rob with the technical knowledge about drug-taking that his book required.

It was Mars' conclusion that Sidney's linen mask represented a bit of bullshitting designed to throw Rob off the track about what really was going on with him.

"Write *Sid sucks* on it with a magic marker and see about his reaction," he said to Rob as he settled in for his magic trip. He had only swallowed three of them. Which for a veteran of the astral plane was tantamount to nibbling along the edges of a crumb. But he was loose enough to start ripping on Dr. Gottschalk independent of any fear of retribution from Rob George. George was still hung up his role as objective arbiter of truth. Talking about Dr. Gottschalk in anything but the most generic of ways still made him uneasy. Even in front of a drug dealer he wouldn't let down his guard.

"He's leading you on man," Mars said to Rob of Sidney Gottschalk. "He's fucking with you to fuck with you. As opposed to fucking with you for some higher purpose like, say, curing cancer."

Mars believed the mask had been stitched together by Sid himself only moments before Rob arrived that morning for the interview.

“He’s an old man with a bunch of old ideas,” he said to Rob. “Probably he saw you coming and decided to do something with you he wanted to do all along. So, he had an old chair in his attic whose upholstery he took a pair of scissors to. It’s clear what he is about, man. You described him to me perfectly a week back when we were doing peyote. He’s a con artist. Somebody who gets off on control. So, all your encounters with him are engineered to intrigue you. He wants you to investigate something far deeper than the facts of his life. But if you were smart, you’d wouldn’t take the bait. You’d write ‘Sid sucks’ on the front of the mask and walk in there tomorrow wearing it. Then you can tell him that you’re even. You can tell him that you saw through what he’s all about with all the sorrowful bullshit he’s been throwing at you.”

Rob had no intention of vandalizing the linen mask as it was part of the historical record. He didn’t give a damn if Sid had made it up. For if he had made it up that too was a piece of history that Rob would faithfully report on.

“I believe he believes what he believes,” he said to Mars of Sidney Gottschalk.

Mars. For the first time Rob wondered if this was his last name or his first name. Maybe it was a descriptive nickname he had given himself. As in *I am from Mars*. He thought it was strange that he didn’t know the nature of his name. Maybe it was a first name shortened to a surname like Madonna or Prince. Mars had made himself into a marketing brand but with nothing to market. Maybe he was merely a willful eccentric who flaunted convention unconsciously. One of these days Rob would get around to asking Mars. Presently it didn’t seem a proper detour to make.

On the way out of this morning’s interview, Sidney Gottschalk had mentioned to Rob that on the way home from that bank robbery experienced while a child, his mother, Gerde, had collapsed on the cable car ride home.

“He believed her to be in the midst of a nervous breakdown at that time,” George told Mars after swallowing two mushrooms without chewing. He broke the fungi up in his hands first. He hated the bitter taste and always believed that mushrooms were a type of low-level poison. (Not, as Mars advertised, the food of the Gods brought down to earth as a blessing.)

He was done with work for the day. He was done discussing the intention of the linen mask.

Gerde Gottschalk, according to Sidney, was consigned to a tragic existence. This was ever since she met and was seduced by the man everyone called Rube, a door to door purveyor of high gloss Bibles of dubious fealty to the original text, and a cocaine dealer on the side.

“*He swept her off her feet*,” was Rob’s direct quote of Sidney’s recapitulation of their courtship. It wasn’t a household much amenable to the sharing of intimate secrets. On the other hand, Gottschalk wasn’t one to indulge in romantic cliches recklessly. Which didn’t make it true, of course. But it had nothing to do with her certainly. Sidney Gottschalk was one of those rare men of whom it could be said that he did not love his mother.

The cable car conductor helped Gerde off the cable car. He lay her down on the nearby sidewalk before continuing on. He had stops to make, you see. He couldn’t be bothered about her welfare. There was something about Gerde that seemed to invite this type of abuse, some hesitancy to her step or the dilapidated state of her clothes. She wasn’t a person whose bearing invited respect apparently. In those days especially for a single mother this attribute guaranteed that no respect of any type would be given.

Young Sidney Gottschalk to his credit stayed by her side during the ordeal. Every so often he would take the time to stare up at the faces of passersby attempting as best he could to memorize each one as a prerequisite for revenge.

“He wanted revenge on them all,” Rob George told Mars feeling for the first time the mushrooms’ call. The psilocybin was eating away at his brain’s executive functions and gradually untethering the senses from

external stimuli and bending them inward unto the realms of thought and feeling and color until the chemical cycled through the brain completely and consensus reality reasserted itself.

Now, as with other interview subjects, this admission of childhood outrage, *I wished for revenge on them all*, would have been ignored by Rob or categorized as a simple descriptive of the moment's feeling of helplessness. But when uttered by Sid Gottschalk, who, according to the pending International Criminal Court accusation, had overseen the drugging, torture, and murder of ninety individuals from 1952 when he assumed the lead of the program MKUltra for the CIA to 1973 in the strange public-private capacity as an advisor for Pinochet government working for a CIA front company, the message assumed an ominous tone.

The little bit of Nexis-based research Rob had performed over the Inn's slow internet had confirmed the mysterious deaths of several citizens of the Connecticut town Sidney grew up in over a twelve year period.

"The microfiche archives of their small-town newspaper are available on the net," he said to Mars who was not listening any longer. "One man fell off his roof in 1942 on a perfect day weather-wise," he said to Mars. "One, in 1947, was found floating in his bathtub bloated beyond recognition by some unidentifiable toxin. The local investigators didn't know what to make of it, so they called in the FBI. That's all the article said," Rob told him, "that they called in the FBI. Who the fuck knew what happened? Or even if Sidney was involved."

Of course, there'd be no way to link Gottschalk to this cluster of murders. And even if there was a way to link him to it that moment back in 1933 with his palsied mother that comprised the murder's motive would be lost. Other than having him describe it in a court of law.

But think: how could a man keep the image of a single person's face espied fleetingly months or even years after the fact indelible enough to make a correct identification years later? Either that man would have been gifted with a superhuman sense of visual recall or he was privy to some inside information. Maybe he was singling out townspeople randomly for retribution. Kill

‘em all and let God sort them out later. With Dr. Gottshalk, Rob George realized nothing was beyond the pale. But because Sid’s brand of psychopathy had always been expressed passively through official channels no ethical overview of Sidney and his many acolytes had ever been attempted. Gottschalk wouldn’t kill a man who had earned his displeasure, Rob didn’t think, but maybe he would manipulate the system so that his property was condemned, he would hire a thug to kill his dog, he would infect the ink on his correspondence with a drug that induced violent diarrhea for days on end, and he would spread a rumor to police and his employers about his pedophilia insuring his ostracism for life.

Even with him admitting to such crimes, likely it wouldn’t be proof enough for authorities to act.

Gerde, Sidney’s lone known relative had died in 1940 three years after he had left Connecticut for Harvard University. There within the span of a few years he would earn the first of four degrees in the field of medical science. He had already distinguished himself as an intellectual force at age sixteen by isolating a particular neurotransmitter present in all primates. When an ape was deficient of the chemical, it caused them to curl up into a ball like an armadillo and remain there locked in pace until the chemical could be replenished. By 1940 he was long clear of Connecticut. It would have been hard to imagine him at that point holding Gerde’s death against the community. Then again, he was resentful of so many and for so many reasons. Even he couldn’t claim where his brilliance began, and his psychopathy ended.

“Sully,” he went around calling himself in those years at Harvard. This was according to a former suitemate of his. As if he was requiring a new identity for himself utterly. Maybe this too was an ironic game initiated to elicit a particular response from others. But, if so, it was difficult to see why. While an undergraduate at Harvard, he was under the thumb of others. He had no power to shield himself from the blowback incurred when one of his games was detected and subsequently diffused. He needed to be on his best behavior either until tenure was granted or the research dollars started flowing. This was

common knowledge even for somebody in his position. It would have been crazy for him to rock the boat.

The sole memento from his Harvard days that Rob George was aware of was a half-rolled up picture of him with fellow undergraduate Robert Patch that bore a cryptic bit of writing on its back, "*To Sully—At least we tried*." The infant bonobo chimp in Patch's arms was, at first and second blush, dead. Who knew then why it was included in the portrait.

Either the shrooms Rob was on had a more potent kick than ordinarily existed from its species or there was something ambient existing in the hotel room that disoriented a person beyond correction. He was feeling slightly sick when he rose from the room's couch on unsteady legs and made for the bed.

"I think," Rob said to a presently insensate Mars on the bedspread next him "we've crossed over to something we can't get a handle on immediately. I think we've all gone too far but can't admit it now. We're trying to think of a way back."

On the TV a video of a male chimpanzee was playing. The chimp's hands were wrapped hard against the bars of its cage. *Aerosolized Anthrax Tested in the Lab* read CNN's chyron underneath the video. Soon the camera, presumably remotely operated, zoomed into the chimp's face. The face was expressionless save the vague longing to be somewhere else. The creature had a place in the forest once just like so many others of its kind. Humans kidnapped him and now he was here.

Within the space of twenty-four hours the chimp would be dead. Which left Rob George to wonder what the funeral would be like. Who would attend? And then what would their reasons be for mourning?

Waiting for Rain (July 1949)

I.

Once, while attending Yale College in the winter of 1935, Josiah Dorset picked up a flyer half-concealed in discolored snow.

Poetry Reading: T.S. Eliot, December 9th, 8:00 PM, Chittenden Hall the flyer read. Read in full, at least according to Josiah's recollection of it 14 years later. Such an advertisement seemed a bit curt, especially as the flyer was likely authored by literary-minded undergrads who were usually in possession of at least a mild logorrhea when it came to matters concerning beautiful letters. So perhaps he was summarizing for brevity's sake. Perhaps he understood the moment's interlocutor was something of a hard case and had no time for dewy reminiscences.

"Something here that recalls *Gerontion* is why I mention it," Josiah said to William "Wild Bill" Monroe, the Public Health System's Director of Research here in Tuskegee, Alabama. "Something about the area to me that suggests the crashing of civilizations back into the dust from which it emerged," he said. "Kicking but oddly silent like a newborn with its umbilicus wrapped around its neck like a noose."

Both he and Monroe were in Alabama to observe the Tuskegee Initiative as it was unofficially called in the halls of the Public Health System which lacked an official naming system for its projects. Dorset, who had joined the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency just after the war, was looking to recruit the talent he found on display here. Unbeknownst to Monroe, he had no ties

with the PHS. He had heard about this project from secondhand sources almost as a rumor. He admired the ruthlessness at its center. He admired the way its progenitors treated other human beings with serial contempt.

Only one of them realized that they were at cross-purposes to each other. It was Josiah's hope that Monroe would get out of his way without being given a direct order to do so. No sense in making an enemy of a man who he did not have any power over despite outward appearances. This level of manipulative-ness was hardly acquired. Certainly not at Yale College or some other proving ground. Rather, in Josiah Dorset it seemed entirely innate. It seemed to arise from a series of deeply felt impulses. Without so much as a consideration of the moral cost involved, it demanded obeisance from its host. Josiah was its slave and that was fine with him. It had benefited him greatly all these years. Without it, he supposed, he would be teaching modern poetry somewhere back East.

Gerontion, Dorset said, was T.S. Eliot's most alluring poem. Presently, he struggled to recall Eliot's own explanation about the meaning of the title. According to Josiah, the poem's decrepit narrator was a stand in for the poet himself. He was describing his own circumstance to an audience of one. After the first stanza there was no need for him to continue to talk. But somehow, he couldn't help himself:

The goat coughs at night in the
field overhead;
Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron,
merds.
The woman keeps the kitchen,
makes tea,
Sneezes at evening, poking the
peevish gutter.

"*I an old man*," Josiah Dorset told Wild Bill, intentionally slurring the next two lines, "*A dull head among windy spaces*."

The tattoo on Bill Monroe's right bicep was of the damaged USS Phoenix whose submerged carcass he barely escaped from in 1944 just before the sharks' arrival.

"What does any of this," he asked Josiah Dorset after briefly brushing his fingers over the tattoo, "have to do with the setting of my next year's budget? Where exactly is the line of fruity poetry that mentions getting my department into the black?"

Of course, Josiah Dorset was simply flitting about waiting for the tour of Tuskegee's facilities to start in earnest. The nonsense about an auditing of Monroe's budget by the PHS was simple cover for spymaster's Josiah's sojourn. He had no intention to reveal the real reason behind his visit to Bill. He didn't think Monroe was befuddled enough yet to be so malleable that he would do as he was told even if the truth was known by him. He wanted him ignorant and on the constant verge of throwing a punch. Just like he was now. He didn't think that Monroe had any real value to him. He wanted Monroe ignorant and outraged. It would make it easier to push him aside later.

Monroe seemed something of a hard case to Josiah Dorset. With his straight talk, sailor's tattoos, and unlettered ways he didn't fit in to the Washington elite. This didn't mean he was of such low intelligence that he couldn't become a problem eventually if he was handled carelessly.

"I don't have your great gift for directness," was how Josiah answered Bill Monroe's query eventually and reached into his jacket's interior pocket. His cigarette case was there sweating it out along with all the other objects on his person. It was hot as hell down here as might be expected, but that didn't dissuade Dorset from keeping his jacket on. Manners before all else, after all. Also, he was in the midst of concealing something. The human body was a signpost from which hung so many secrets. He had learned the art of being buttoned down his first month in the service as a method of intelligence gathering. His teachers wanted him to look no different from one day to the next. They would attempt to ascertain how many hours of sleep Josiah had received

the previous evening with a glance to the number of wrinkles in his trousers. His job, therefore, was always to be implacable by being impeccable. The shirt collar if it was slightly upturned one day must be similarly upturned on the following day. And so forth. It was important to never leave a physical trail behind one. But this was easier said than done. Maintaining this sort of lack of affect was a true art. One would need to stare into the mirror for half hour intervals before and after getting dressed. One would need to cut one's hair especially short so there was no trail left by a comb let's say that was different than on other days. There should be no Pome-Aid deposited on a shirt collar that marked one as less than one's fastidious self.

Dorset was taking all possible measures to ensure that Wild Bill was in the dark about his true intentions. This called for a continuous series of conversational misdirection to avoid coming to the point inadvertently. Also, he wanted to make Monroe as uncomfortable as possible before he began to act on his own. Josiah Dorset didn't employ the aggressive management style favored by so many of his colleagues in the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency. Unlike so many of them, (and Monroe too for that matter) he had never in his life been described as roughhewn. He had never seen combat, for example. He had sat out the war in General Bradley's London office, proofreading press releases. All instances of physical violence witnessed and performed made him deeply nervous for many hours after the fact. He had not yet killed in the line of duty. He doubted very much that he could kill if called upon to do so.

He was keen on modern poetry especially that of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. They had it right, he thought. They believed that the world was going to hell in a hand basket. There was a sense of decay to this Alabama infirmary that jibed well with *Gerontion*. Dorset wasn't being excessively coy when he said this to Monroe. He said the first thing that had popped into his head. He didn't give a damn what Wild Bill thought of the allusion.

"*My house is a decayed house*," Dorset said to Monroe seeing the blood run from his face as he spoke, "*and the jew squats on the window sill, the*

owner/Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp/Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London."

While in London during the war Dorset had in fact developed patches of eczema on both elbows owing to the stress of his position. He decided to keep quiet about it. Nothing came of it. He procured a coal tar solution on his own to ease the itch and the eczema disappeared within three weeks. There was no need for him to go and visit the hospital for treatment where so many of the wounded were being warehoused. There was no need to include himself on a list that would qualify him for a Purple Heart. One of his colleagues had put in for a Purple Heart when he was stabbed through the eye by a Soho pimp for taking excessive liberties with the merchandise once too often.

"I don't blame you for being cross with me," Josiah said to Bill Monroe after a few minutes of silence. "I know you want answers from me. I know you want to be made aware about my visit's impact on your budget. I know you would like a definite accounting of what we have to offer you. You are not alone in your desire to speed this process to its conclusion. But there are protocols to be observed before we can declare ourselves satisfied about all that we see."

When you have a fish on the line, a fighter, Josiah's sportsman of a father was fond of telling him, patience was preferred over strength.

"Eventually," Josiah said to his mark, "everything will be made clear. Until then, you will just have to wait in line with all the others."

The reason Josiah was leading him on in this extravagant way, Bill Monroe had assumed, was that it was Dorset's intention to shut down the on-going experiments at the Tuskegee Institute.

"You are an assassin coming in disguise as an auditor," he said to Josiah Dorset. He watched as a smile unfurled in stages across the span of Dorset's nicotine-stained lips. Dumb thing to say, obviously, to a man who had been vested with the power to shut you down, but that was Bill Monroe for you. Shipwrecked in the Pacific, he survived by directly attacking the sharks that were attacking them, by diving underneath the surface and

kicking them in the snout with one ragged heel. To him, cunning was another form of cowardice. He saw it as profoundly dishonorable to do anything else but directly confront a prospective enemy.

Monroe's deepest fear surrounding Dorset's presence was that they (whoever *they* might be in the Leviathan of the post-war government) had already reached a negative conclusion about the program and had filed the paperwork related to project termination. In Bill's imaginings likely it was Josiah Dorset's job to let everyone involved down easy. He was the proverbial corporate hatchet man from a thousand middle managers' nightmares, a con artist whose strategy was to focus Bill's attention on truly minor details. He would talk up unnecessary expenditures while undertaking an entire gutting of the project long term behind Monroe's back. He didn't think there could be any other explanation to Dorset's dithering. He didn't think a capable person would comport himself in this manner otherwise.

According to Bill Monroe, all decisions relating the Tuskegee Project had already been made. So, Josiah should remove his head from his ass momentarily and take a good look at all that Bill had built in Alabama. The war overseas had been won but the war at home was being badly mismanaged. More than any of the doctors associated with the experiments, Monroe honestly believed this was the case. There was a tide of black disease welling up ready to annihilate America's capability to fight the next war. Syphilis was a greater threat to America than the Soviet atomic bomb. It was something that must be stemmed at all costs. It was a military project as far as Bill was concerned masquerading as benign medicine.

Monroe told Josiah Dorset "You need to be educated on the ramifications for the national defense if our funding is pulled. You need to dive into some of our case files and examine the results for yourself. You need to examine some of the transmission rates were dealing with before you decide to pull the plug."

In the colored population that comprised their study's scope, syphilis affected the heart and brain more

than the outward disfigurements caused by gummae of which the disease was most famous for.

“Don’t talk to me of the penicillin cure,” Monroe told Dorset who had no intention of doing so. Wild Bill began to cite studies claiming that Dr. Fleming’s miracle drug was at best only twenty percent effective against the Great Imitator. It wasn’t a cure. It was hardly a treatment, according to Monroe. At least not down here in the places where mistrust of medicine was so rampant. “The colored don’t like the sting of needles so much,” Monroe said, claiming that ninety percent of them had never been to the doctors in their lives. Even the talk of penicillin spooked them, he said, to the point that they were considering dropping out of the study entirely. So, you see, here was the problem at hand. There was no pharmacological cavalry prepared to save the populous from the menace of disease. It was left to them, therefore, to the courageous personnel of this barely known study, to build a firewall against the modern plague. Their names would be recalled in history books in reverential terms, Monroe said. He didn’t think there was any question about that. If successful, he didn’t think this project would be remembered as anything else but a second Good War.

So, in this lone aspect, Josiah Dorset held some value for Monroe. Perhaps he should be befriended, but Bill was too bullheaded to even try it. All the T.S. Eliot/Yale talk of Dorset’s had put him off his game. Wild Bill knew he was an outsider amongst the Washington elite and took pains to obfuscate his working-class roots whenever possible. Even at this Alabama outpost he had experienced many awkward moments with the grandees from the Potomac. He didn’t know what he should say in the presence of the over class. He didn’t know their language. He didn’t know how to fit in with them.

So instead of apologizing and seeking out Josiah’s further impressions of the project, Bill Monroe began to fallaciously recall for Dorset a story about having met T.S. Eliot in the fall of 1927.

“We had him over to our fraternity after his reading,” he said to Josiah Dorset who at the moment was enjoying his Camel cigarette perhaps a little too much for

politeness' sake. "We offered to have him stay the night, but he declined," Bill said and thought immediately that he had said too much already. He couldn't read Josiah at all. This was in sharp contrast to every other human being he had encountered. There was a strange stillness to Dorset that interfered with ordinary perception. There was a shiftiness to his gaze that never admitted any sort of real emotion even if he was in the midst of threatening you directly.

T.S. Eliot, Bill was sure, was an Englishman with an Oxbridge pedigree. If pressed by Josiah to imitate his accent, he would demure. He would claim such details had always proven to be elusive to him.

"We offered to drive him to Penn Station later on," he told Dorset, "But this too he declined. He was very much his own man at least in those days," he said. "Had a handshake like a vise grip, I remember. Smoked a brand of foreign cigarettes of which I was unfamiliar."

Josiah Dorset asked Bill Monroe after his favorite Eliot poem.

"It's hard to choose one over the other," he said. "It'd be like choosing between one of your children."

"I've always found," said Josiah Dorset, "the bond between parent and child to be deeply mysterious. I couldn't see under what circumstances, if pressed to do so, how I couldn't choose between one child and the other."

In fact, the only poems Bill (ne' Wild Bill) Monroe could presently credibly claim to remember presently were those limericks memorized while at sea. The best of which began, *There was an old woman named Hunt*.

"I will aver to this," Dorset said, "The verse you memorize while as a youth will follow you to your grave."

Here Josiah was quoting one of his old Yale profs, but he meant it regardless. In junior year, in fact, he used to memorize a poem a day. Even now, *Gerontion* was still at the forefront of his imagination. It had been occurring to him ever since stepping foot on the Tuskegee infirmary's grounds.

No squatting Jews in Tuskegee, Alabama. But there was a goat that Josiah had witnessed coughing in a field nearby. He couldn't help but making the connection.

More importantly there was a certain boggish smell to this place that seemed redolent of the type of modern rot that Eliot had in mind when he began the poem.

"*The tiger springs in the New Year*," Josiah Dorset told Bill Monroe and let the smoke in his sinuses exit between the tiny spaces of his otherwise perfect teeth. "*Us he devours*."

II.

The reason for this delay, the reason he and Monroe were lounging in what passed for the small infirmary's administrative offices, was that a request had been made by Josiah to meet with project's doctors one on one.

"They'll make it in under protest," Monroe had said to Josiah after the initial calls out to Montgomery and points west were made by Bill. There was really no reason for any of them to come to Tuskegee up a two-lane road more than once a week. There was usually one of them on call during normal clinical hours Tuesday through Thursday.

Two of the doctors were old veterans of this Public Health Service project. One dated back to 1929. The third, Sidney Gottschalk, had been here less than a year. Thus, he could not be counted on to speak with any sort of authoritative knowledge about the daily goings on at Tuskegee. To Monroe, Dr. Gottschalk seemed so withdrawn that it was surprising that he was even on board. He didn't seem emboldened with the patriotic fervor that drove the other two physicians forward with this project, now in its twentieth year. He didn't seem part of the team whose work eventually, Monroe had been told, would save society from a pathogenic menace.

The only reason for a top doctor to be down here was raw patriotism. Necessarily low-profile, there was little prestige attached to the project. In fact, those few outside physicians who had known about the project's existence were appalled by it. Appalled to the point that they felt the need to complain about it through official government channels, thus putting their own careers in

jeopardy. Most of the Tuskegee Project's administrators were ex-military officers like Monroe who viewed dissent as indiscernible from treason when concerning official government acts. They would eventually go after these men hard. They had no real tolerance or understanding of anything like loyal opposition. They thought the Third World War was in essence already underway. They thought treason law should apply to acts of subversion too.

Most syphilis cases that the Tuskegee Project had been tracking over the past twenty years were existing instances of the disease. The project had volunteered (and purposely failed) to treat these.

"Just about forty," Monroe had answered Dorset when asked how many subjects had been injected with syphilis last year. According to Bill, this practice had started when it became clear (at least to them) that readily available penicillin would eventually put an end to their case studies. They wanted to have a way of tracking each case through the disease's tertiary phase. So, they decided to introduce the bacillus into select populations that were ignorant of what the injections contained. Therefore, there would be no impetus for them to seek treatment for syphilis outside the project's parameters. As far as they knew they were part of a control group. Syphilis' acute phase had been explained away as a psychosomatic side effect. The Project had produced charts and official certificates avowing that they were disease free as part of the deception. Staffers had offered to drive patients to a doctor in Birmingham to get a second opinion if this was their will.

Though Josiah did not specify as much, this "proactive phase" of the experiment so-called, once the CIA had confirmed its existence, was the reason for his visit. Its ruthlessness and anti-humanist nature appealed to him greatly. He wanted to see how it was being handled. Most especially he was interested in who was holding the secret knowledge. He understood the need for counterintelligence surrounding a top-secret project. He wanted to see how somebody outside the intelligence community was handling it. There needed to be procedures put in place to assure secrecy. It needed to

go far beyond mere oversight or oaths of office. His real purpose for visiting was to observe how effective these procedures were. For example, he needed to know how the information was being filtered. He was interested in the subject. He needed to know if bribes or blackmail were being employed and if so what their efficacy was. Josiah Dorset was very fastidious in his approach to what he called counterintelligence. He wanted to develop a strategy for it within the CIA's confines like a great poet would develop a poem. Hundreds of iterations would be required in this endeavor likely. Just like T.S. Eliot he would keep at it until it was completed.

Monroe was Josiah's dupe. Because in Josiah's estimation Monroe couldn't be trusted to keep a secret. The reason he couldn't be trusted to keep a secret was that, as for as Josiah could see, he had no motivation to keep a secret. He was out of the CIA's orbit for now and, at least in this instance, not subject to prosecution for treason if he happened to spill the beans. He could be bullied, bribed, intimated into compliance but these techniques came with their own substantial risks. The easiest way of controlling an individual was denying them access to information. You lied to them and stonewalled them routinely so they would never be able to tell the truth later. It was simple information management. It had nothing to do with breaking some mythical Golden Rule. It had nothing to do with some abstract notion of ethical conduct where an agent was bound to adhere to a series of unimpeachable laws.

But you also had to be aware that, as you lied to others, others were lying to you. And as your lies had been forged to offset the false information provided in *their* lies (and vice-versa), a vicious cycle was present. So, in the field of counterintelligence, lies and truth became entirely useless concepts. Their unironic use marked a spy as either green or moronic. Knowing this, Josiah constantly summoned Eliot's famous phrase *a wilderness of mirrors* to describe his predicament. The longer his tenure as counterintelligence officer, the greater his appreciation was for the phrase. He thought the goal was always to lie a little better or at least with more conviction than those who were lying to you. But,

regardless, such uncertainty created an air of suspicion that, at least at the outset of his spy career, Josiah found unpleasant. The longer he was engaged in counterintelligence operations, the tighter the circle would be drawn. Soon even his own thoughts would be suspect. At which point he would declare the Free World's efforts against the Communist menace a type of Bolshevik conspiracy. He would place his revolver against his right temple and submit his resignation in spectacular fashion.

He reckoned this was decades down the road. Presently the game was entirely clear for Josiah. It was also clear who it was that must be confided in and who it was that must be frozen out of all relevant bits of knowledge. Down here he was especially clear-minded. Because nobody else within eight hundred miles realized the stakes of the game. Presently, the Soviet Union had yet to get their hands on the bomb. Few American policy planners had seen the need to divide the world into a chess board. Here in Alabama local officials were racially obsessed. They saw licentious niggers as a greater threat to national security than Communists. The quaintness of this worldview filled Dorset with a secret glee. Such rednecks would never be a threat to him if they didn't even know what game they were playing.

The reason that Wild Bill Monroe must be targeted for a campaign of disinformation was that based on his profile alone he appeared to be one of these straight arrow types who could not tell a lie convincingly under pain of death. To Josiah Dorset, this was not a mark of honesty. Rather it was a mark of a general lack of imagination.

"I didn't want this post," he said to Dorset in an unfortunate moment of candor in the infirmary's administrative wing. "But it grew on me over time, the more I realized all the good we were doing down here."

Syphilis, Bill Monroe had become convinced through repeated talks with the project's medical director Dr. Leo Thane, was the scourge of the black race. Thus, ending it as soon as possible and by any means necessary was not only allowed but demanded of a virtuous man. You didn't truly love a man until you felt entitled to lie to him. But

lying in any sense was distasteful for Bill. He realized, nevertheless, in this instance that it was warranted.

“Hear me out for a second before you judge me,” Monroe said to Dorset. “You need to take a look at some of the congenital cases before you take sides.”

Bill assumed Josiah Dorset was raising the subject of the project’s proactive phase to condemn the practice. Before he did, Bill said, he needed to look for himself at some of the congenital cases. The little children with noses missing and gaping holes in their faces. What sort of life do you think they would have? It was Monroe’s expectation that eventually all the unwilling subjects would be treated with a suitable amount of penicillin to cure them. He had been apprised that the latent phase of the disease could be as long as fifteen years. There was plenty of time to treat afterward before any permanent damage was done. He didn’t think there was any harm being done to anybody.

In this project they weren’t focusing their energies so much on achieving a cure so much as trying to ascertain a pattern of transmission in colored communities over several decades.

“The colored seem indifferent to their own well-being,” Monroe told Dorset by way of an explanation for the project’s avoidance of penicillin for the time being. “It’s unfortunate to say this but it’s so. We’re trying to monitor the epidemic. We’re looking for patterns of transmission that we can interrupt later on,” he said. “We’re trying to head off what would have seemed inevitable twenty years ago. We’re trying to save a population, not just one or two individuals. By doing so we run the risk of appearing as monsters to outsiders. But they need to look beneath the surface of what’s going on before they make any sort of judgment. Blacks by-and-large don’t look out for each other. So, it’s up to the white man to improve their lot. And if they ain’t gonna help you there’s no harm in not being upfront with them as you would have been had you been dealing with a Caucasian.”

There was a line of a Johnny Mercer song that Josiah now recalled. It said much the same thing as Monroe had said, only in pithier terms.

“You cure the disease,” Dorset told Monroe, “Eventually you run out research subjects. And research funding.”

Monroe wouldn’t have put it like that exactly. But, at least in the short term, this was the gist of it.

“The negro race is essentially different to the white race in many ways,” he told Dorset and briefly contemplated the intercession of a horsefly into the yellow corridor they were walking down. He didn’t understand how these insects kept on intruding into the infirmary’s interior. There was livestock all over the Institute’s small campus, Bill supposed, that supported such vermin. But he didn’t understand how any of them had ever gotten inside. Monroe’s first substantive act as project director was to order the repair of every window screen in the infirmary. Not a medical man, he had a simplistic notion of infectious disease. Which was that it occurred outdoors and insinuated itself indoors in stages. He didn’t know really from microbiology. He assumed it as a military problem. As if a foreign army needed to be held at bay for as long as possible until relief came.

While floating in the middle of the Pacific Bill recalled being more horrified by the blood and human remains in the water than by the sharks that had caused their occurrence.

“We have so much to deal with down here,” he said unto Josiah about the project’s present status. He soon realized the mistake he had made saying it. Dorset obviously wasn’t a neutral observer of the Tuskegee Project. Thus, he shouldn’t be confided in. Intimating that you were overburdened to someone who lacked a sympathetic ear was the same as admitting you weren’t up to the job. Bill Monroe knew this, but whenever he became nervous his mouth ran ahead of his brain. By saying this he was simply admitting to Dorset that he had had enough. He was simply requesting, albeit in an indirect way, that he be removed from the project.

Fortunately for Bill, Josiah was not here in any real oversight capacity.

“I’ll need a meal at some point,” he said to Monroe once situated in the records room. Of late, this room was kept under double pad lock. Despite Bill’s eagerness to

show it off, it seemed to hold secrets toxic enough to be off-limits from ordinary infirmary staff and anybody else who happened by.

Dorset wanted to examine the records for evidence that the doctors on this project were aware of the evil inherent in their efforts.

“No Johnny Milquetoasts, no knock-kneed sissies afraid of their own shadows,” was the direction Josiah gave himself once the door to the records room was closed. He thought about the usefulness of his stay thus far. Going in, he had no specific plans about how long he would be here. Much of it depended on the usefulness of the information he found while on his visit. Up until now he hadn’t held out much hope for true revelation. He had only talked to Monroe thus far and he found him somebody devoid of real understanding for the rudiments of his job. If all the doctors were of the same stripe as Wild Bill this would have been a wasted trip. Somehow, he didn’t think this was the case. The fact that the secret program was proceeding unbidden with ample knowledge of Dr. Fleming’s breakthrough—the doctors knew that penicillin was a cure for the clap-- gave him an insight into the kind of men these were. He knew once he met with them there would be some commonality between them. He knew that they would understand Josiah’s needs far better than somebody like Bill Monroe.

There was a need for confidentiality amongst all serious men. Josiah Dorset thought this was self-evident but, despite the padlocks on the records room, the notion would strike Bill Monroe as subversive. Bill couldn’t detect the proof of his own very real subversion of the American ideal. He looked at his project’s own inhumane protocols through the distorted lens of America’s racist present and past. He didn’t think in the broader sense that he had anything to hide. He kept quiet about things merely because he was told to do so. On some future occasion he would wind up disclosing information simply because he was told to do that as well.

The records room from which the padlocks had been removed before Dorset entered was a windowless sixteen foot by twelve-foot alcove. Filing cabinets lined

every inch of every wall straight to the ceiling. Each cabinet was full of folders. The meaning of the labeling on each folder was unknown to Josiah. The labels were a code of some kind. Josiah didn't understand the code. It seemed that there had been an attempt made to organize the folders, but Josiah didn't understand the system. Some of the folders lacked labels completely. Some were illegible. Some were girls' names and some were items that one would find in a New York City delicatessen like *pickle* or *tongue sandwich*. To Josiah's practiced eye, the folders' names seemed too random to be entirely random. He understood them as a code for which he presently lacked a key. If this was a security measure it was strange why some of the files were out in the open. Everything seemed haphazardly arranged. Perhaps true secrecy required that no files should exist at all. But this went against the project's stated medical protocols. Dorset assumed that doctors needed to track these patients from one stage of the disease to the next. They needed to keep careful records to contribute to the available body of medical literature.

When the project's lead medical officer, Dr. Thane, finally arrived from his office in Montgomery the reason for the files' desultory state was explained away in several seconds.

"Wild Bill thinks it's going to be easier for him to get into heaven if he makes a hash of the project," he told Dorset after requesting one of the succulent Camels in his cigarette case. Down here, Thane said, you'd be surprised at the quality of cigarettes. The local sellers were forced to market the seedy Alabama tobacco in cylindrical tins. This was not so much an official boycott of the products of North Carolina but an ex-officio scam wherein south bound cigarette trucks were routinely intercepted by the thugs that the Farmer's Association hired and "liberated" of their bounty. Sad but true, Leo Thane said. And woe betide the local law enforcement official who was brave enough to investigate such bald larceny. It was just the way it was down here in the South, Thane told Josiah. It had been that way ever since Reconstruction. A thread of corruption had been woven into society so deeply that natives were not even aware

that it was there. Generations had grown up with a complete disrespect for prevailing authority. They had raised hell all through life. There were in turn other hell raisers who were left to police them. It wasn't a formula to encourage the proliferation of civil society. It was, rather, a recipe for the instantiation of a semi-fascist state wherein even respectable white doctors were made to feel nervous if they were outsiders. The terrible tobacco with their seeds and stems were just a single symptom of an overall rottenness. But people who lived under the system all their lives probably didn't even notice anything was wrong. The fear was ambient and omnipresent down here, like the electric discharge absorbed when growing up near a transformer tower. A man's attention would need to be drawn to it by degrees. It would have been simply there like God in his Heaven. It would semi-blasphemous to even mount an investigation.

Temporarily sated by the Camel's fine blue smoke Dr. Thane continued.

"He's an incompetent of the worst stripe," he told Dorset of his boss, Monroe. "She's somebody who could do better if properly motivated to but chooses not to out of matters of entirely unrelated to the project's success. He's a never-was who masquerades as a has-been. Men like him are contemptible. A capable manager should surmise him and declare him unfit for his position immediately."

In WWII while serving in the European theater of operations a specific type of head case had started arriving in Leo Thane's ward. This was just after D Day, he recalled. These hopeless wretches reminded him of Monroe's daily performance as project director.

"They weren't crazy in any verifiable, textbook type of way," he said of those patients, "but rather had seemed to have forgotten everything that was required of them to be an effective soldier," he told Josiah. "And by everything, I mean *everything*," he said. "They had lost the basic information about how to load their rifles, for example, or even tie a boot. They all seemed entirely earnest. Most were indignant at the charges of insubordination that they were daily being threatened

with. To a man they felt themselves deeply motivated to solider on but had seemed to have lost the mental ability to do so. We tried to teach them how again, but they could not re-learn it. They were blocked in some weird way. Their minds were revolting against the terror of being a soldier. Many of them began to believe that they were in the grips of supernatural possession. Some were religious, some not. But they all thought the devil lay behind their maladies. They didn't believe that a medical man like me offered them any hope whatsoever.

"Some of them wound up shooting themselves when administering a type of self-exorcism," Dr. Thane said. "They literally did not know which was the business end of a gun anymore. They literally did not remember how to remain alive."

Bill Monroe's efforts struck Leo Thane as a type of will-less incompetence. They were executed in the name of some personal, selfish goal such as being able to retire with a full pension fifteen years on.

"If this wasn't a hush-hush thing," Dr. Thane told Dorset of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments, "he'd have been sacked long ago. At which point I'd have taken over for him. But when projects like this one are kept off the books proper oversight becomes difficult. I'm assuming this is what you are here for," Dr. Thane said. "The government is not getting their money's worth with him running things. Because, as you can see for yourself, Wild Bill's way of keeping track of things leaves much to be desired. Taking a charitable view it's probably not his fault. But here you see the wreckage in his wake. I assume you will be obliged to do something to counteract it."

Indeed, it was Dr. Thane's contention that the *pickle* and *tongue* labels were simple insignificant names scrawled on the files perhaps only hours in advance of Josiah's visit. Maybe this was what Wild Bill wanted for lunch. Or maybe it was a bit of stream-of-consciousness impromptu of the sort that Dorset tried while in the Yale Library when crafting modernist verse of his own.

It wasn't a code for anything. Of this Leo Thane was sure.

“Eighteen months ago, I started keeping my own files,” he told Dorset, “In my own office in Montgomery. We had patients drifting in and out of the project over the span of years,” he said. “Impossible for a white man to sort them out just by their looks, you understand,” Thane said, “And your average black man is given to exaggeration and outright lies regarding their own sexual history. It’s nobody’s fault but it’s something to consider. It’s one in a series of atavistic traits, I’d wager,” Dr. Thane said. “It’s what contributed to this child-like affectation in them originally. Which was to say they could simply not be trusted to faithfully relate their medical history, let alone their sexual history, to medical personnel.”

Leo Thane inhaled deeply before continuing.

“With this in mind,” he said, “Monroe’s record keeping is a double sin. In a higher profile experiment it would be grounds for removal. But, again, he is shielded by the requirements of relative discretion we as medical professionals need to observe. Until your arrival nobody had ever taken him to task. You are the first bureaucrat we’ve beheld with any power at all.”

The photos that were in some of the folders were alarming to Josiah and he meant to ask Dr. Thane if they had made it into the case histories by mistake. Many of them seemed like the deformations one would observe in the impoverished places of the world where medical care was entirely absent. He couldn’t believe the extent of the damage to the faces. He couldn’t believe that the entire apparatus of the nose for example could be eaten away completely within the space of six months. He was not fully aware of the disease’s ravages until now. He could not believe that it was left unchecked by men who had taken a Hippocratic Oath.

“I’ve stepped foot into this room at most three times in the past four years,” Dr. Thane said to Josiah Dorset. He suggested that Josiah’s inspection be terminated at this point. He thought the state of the records room should be evidence enough for Dorset to remove Monroe from his post. He said that Josiah should take all the evidence he needed with him, but he shouldn’t investigate the Tuskegee infirmary beyond this point. It

might only prove too confusing to those Josiah reported to concerning the projects' essential nature. It might only lead to the misguided conclusion that the project was danger of going off the rails.

According to Leo Thane, there was no moral equivocation necessary from anyone involved. Indeed, everything that had been done on this project up until now had been done elsewhere. And with a greater callousness than was taking place here.

"I was in the Rhine Commission at its outset I'll have you know," Thane told Dorset of his exposure to the methods used by the Nazis on concentration camp internees. "There is no comparison between our protocols and Dr. Mengele's," he said. "There's no need for anybody to pick up with that false line of reasoning," he said. "In fact, it's libelous by any standard."

Think of the things you would see when walking into Auschwitz, for example, just after it had been liberated, he instructed Josiah. Prisoners with their eyeballs removed and one part of their body sewn into a place where it couldn't be removed. And so on. It's hard to think how anybody would confuse that sort of mistreatment to what is taking place presently in Tuskegee. It's a patently false comparison, he said. Not even close.

Monroe in fact had made the same comparison during a rare staff meeting when Sidney Gottschalk wondered after the possibility of using the program to investigate other pathogens such as the mumps or rubella.

"He was merely thinking out loud," Dr. Thane said of his junior colleague who had not yet made it onto campus yet. "A medical professional indulging in a what-if scenario. Monroe demanded an apology, but didn't get one," Leo said. "No need for that sort of outburst amongst gentlemen," he said. "Wild Bill, that is, not Sid Gottschalk."

Sidney in turn demanded Bill Monroe apologize. Monroe refused to do so, and the meeting ended. It was outrageous behavior as far as Dr. Thane was concerned. If there was a board to complain to, he would have done so at once on Sideny's behalf. But, as you might expect,

an org chart for this sort of project was hard to come by. There was no real hierarchy at all.

The promptness of Leo Thane's arrival in Tuskegee was motivated by his hope that he could coax Josiah Dorset into taking over the project himself at least temporarily until a suitable replacement for Monroe could be discovered.

"We're at the end of our rope here metaphorically," he said to Josiah and stared momentarily at the tip of the half-burnt Camel as if something miraculous was happening in its reddish confines. It was being consumed all too quickly for him. Unlike his patients, he was busy devising strategies to extend its life. The Alabama tobacco coupled with the project's insufferable director had coalesced for Dr. Thane into a single annoying entity. He saw Josiah as the antidote. He wanted Josiah to take over and send an enormous truck filled with Tennessee bought cigarettes into the state. He assumed Josiah had the full power of the government behind him. He assumed he could do as he wanted, or else Bill Monroe would never have let him into the records room on his own recognizance.

There was a lot of horrifying material here, truly. In Leo Thane's view everything in this room required an explanation. Context was needed concerning the monstrosities. These in turn were requiring documentation. The documentation needed to be included in the files surrounding the monstrosities, like rabbinical commentary in the Talmud.

"The gummae," Dr. Thane said to Josiah, "are more pronounced amongst the black population than in any other race given a comparable gestation period." When he said this, he pointed with the mostly consumed fag to one photograph laying on top of the pile. This specimen, a victim of tertiary syphilis nicknamed Lucifer by Leo Thane after the twin gummae on either side of his forehead was dead presently. By his own hand. In the last months of his life Lucifer walked around the Institute with a feed bag on his head with two holes cut out for the eyes. He couldn't stand the light of day towards the end owing to the disease. So, he would only come out at night.

They weren't aware of Lucifer's friends or family. For the most part that information was never queried by Tuskegee staff. They didn't see the experiment participants as human beings whose dignified nature required suitable memoriam. Apes might have friends and family too, after all. But when a study participant expired because of experimentation no outreach was enacted. It was all animate meat to the staff. That meat became bio-waste after the divine spark fled. Nothing to think about, no eulogy to perform. This was what it meant to live in a racist society. In a racist society there was a great deal of cognitive dissonance involved in daily acts. The patriotic doctors involved in this project could never reconcile this cruelty with their high-flown humanist ambition underwriting the project's existence.

The best Leo Thane could say about Lucifer was that they had not been the ones to give him syphilis originally.

"There was a country brothel fifteen miles south of the village where so many of these cases were contracted. For obvious reasons this knowledge was never reported to the local populous. The whores of Alabama were doing so much of the onerous work for free," Leo said. "We were not state health officials anyway. We let the goobers in Montgomery deal with such outbreaks and ignored the cluster altogether," Leo Thane said.

"Lucifer was happier not knowing his fate," Dr. Thane told Dorset though he had not been asked after his patient's mental state. "He always believed he was getting the best care possible and that he would survive. The gummae when they arrived, he attributed to a curse of some kind rendered by God for his sins. And we encouraged him in this delusion. He never sought out a second opinion as far as we know. Which was a good thing for us all around. We always needed to spread this rumor around about bad blood amongst the general populace. We always needed to provide him with extra benefits such as free wart removal. These were during the times when he started asking too many questions about what was happening to him."

According to Leo, there was a colored nurse who helped them to keep the subjects engaged in the study. Her name too escaped him, but it hardly mattered. He had sent her a Christmas present last year. If Josiah wanted, her name could be retrieved by phone call. Or likely she was on the infirmary grounds even now and she could be summoned in a pinch.

“We need to clarify our position in relation to the black race overall,” Leo Thane told Josiah Dorset seeing a troubled look scrawl across his face if ever so briefly. “We are not race-haters, not those White Sons of the Morning Star, those hood-wearing knight riders you’ve no doubt heard so much about in this part of the world,” Dr. Thane said. “Indeed, our singular concern is with the continued well-being of the negro race. We see syphilis as a greater threat to them than the legacy of Jim Crow,” he said. “The transmission rates amongst certain populations of coloreds are astronomical,” he said. “The new treatment of penicillin is yet to be fully demonstrated as a long-term cure.”

According to Leo Thane, there were strains of resistant bacteria being cultivated in various sharecroppers’ scrotal sacks even now. The greater problem with syphilis according to him was that its transmission paths were largely hidden from view and for obvious reasons. The Tuskegee Project was attempting to map the entire causal chain. They were doing so in admittedly primitive circumstances, but this was unavoidable given the project’s secretive nature. They were trying to save the negro race from itself. It wasn’t unthinkable that a one hundred percent occurrence rate by the outset of the next century would be hit. Dr. Thane wasn’t prepared to say that it would happen but it wasn’t impossible according to him.

“Simple as children, licentious as tree-bound apes,” Thane said of his control group as a means of underlining the project’s urgency. To judge by infection rates, the percentage of men having sought out the services of a prostitute was around seventy percent. It was probably worse amongst city-dwelling blacks that were thus far out of reach of the study. Routine reports of unmarried coloreds having twenty to forty different sexual partners

a year! According to Leo Thane this all but guaranteed a sexually transmitted epidemic of some kind. The federal government needed to see this as a security matter more so than a health concern, in Thane's estimation. The possibility for Soviet-waged germ warfare was entirely realistic and even likely. In that eventuality the impoverished negroes of the south would be the likely primary targets. One whore could infect a hundred men, Leo estimated, within the span of a week. At this point a true epidemic amongst the black populace would be guaranteed. It would over time spread to the white population. And then you would have a true dilemma. Not only for health officials but civil defense officials as well. Who would be forced to divert needed resources to treat the infected.

Thane thought a program of forced sterilization was the likely direction that the data would suggest must be taken. With infected women, sterilization could proceed after an arrest for prostitution. It could be defended as a simple bit of prison hygiene gone wrong. With males, absent a technological breakthrough such an x-ray gun that could kill the scrotal cells from a distance, there would need to be an elaborate ruse constructed beforehand.

"We had an idea about putting out information concerning a new form of virility treatment," Thane told Josiah citing only one idea the Tuskegee doctors had come up with. "And once we have them in the stirrups, they'll be no worse for wear. They'll be given twenty dollars and made to sign a release. The procedure that we're talking about here takes less than thirty minutes," Thane told Josiah. "It's something a skilled surgeon could do twenty times a day if necessary. A false name will be provided, and they'll close shop within several months. The ones with congenital syphilis I believe have already been forbidden to reproduce under Alabama law. There's a man from the state we talk to every few months to square our records. I don't know if they take matters into their own hands so to speak but it's a state law. They at least are interested in monitoring what we are going forward with."

The only question Josiah Dorset had about any of this was whose idea had it been to use the ruse of a virility treatment to ensure that no more congenital cases would be produced.

"Sidney Gottschalk had the original notion about the need to be discreet," Leo Thane said to him. "I'm not asking you to take it up with him if you are offended by the notion," he said. "I am his superior. Together we pushed the notion repeatedly. He was sure about our ability to remain beyond detection of prevailing authority. He stressed repeatedly that any person would accept the reality that was put in front of him if one was consistent in the presentation. I am still not sure of the validity of this assertion, but he believed it could be done. His theory was apparently derived from when he was on staff at a mental hospital in Washington. He stressed the need for us to persist in the lie past the point of our being able to rationally defend it. If some person tries to disarm your lie with logic, he said, you simply deny that logic in this situation would ever apply. He said that men's brains are not like a computer. Men were fundamentally irrational creatures so they should be treated that way. Supposedly he has scientific proof for the efficacy of this approach. It seems to me that there is something counterintuitive in the supposition. But I signed onto the theory regardless out of lack of a proper countertheory. It seems like something a young man might have made up, but he swears it will bear fruit over time."

Of course, it didn't matter to Josiah if any sort of verifiable statistical correlation could be established between the proffered lie and its effect. What mattered to him was that somebody in this project had given serious thought to the relationship between lies and their consequences. This was what he was looking for, what he had come down here in search of. The sort of talent he was looking for matched the Ivy League-type (though wherever they had matriculated wasn't necessarily going to be held against them). Dorset required a mixture of creativity, amorality, and medical knowledge for the position he had in mind. The creators of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments had shown promise along these

lines. But they were otherwise too ideologically motivated, too filled with racialist sentiments to be especially good at espionage. They needed to be more open-minded in their thinking, Josiah felt, to be motivated to do what had to be done. As opposed to what they considered to be “right” (as filtered through their pre-enlightenment notions of what rightness entailed). They were too stuck in the muck of the broader culture to be of much use to him. They couldn’t see their way out of societal deceptions to create political deceptions on their own. Dupes in other words, just like Wild Bill Monroe. But he wasn’t going to nurse a grudge against Dr. Thane for being too conventional.

He wanted a true scientist of deception.

He wanted somebody who had no real allegiance to any unverifiable notion. This included the notion that the United States of America was infused with moral superiority compared to the Soviet Union.

“You didn’t take to Dr. Gottschalk’s ideas right away,” Dorset said to Dr. Thane making an associative leap that revealed him as somebody entirely at odds with the decorum of casual conversation.

“No,” Dr. Thane said after stifling the impulse to ask for another cigarette, “I did not hardly either.”

“Protocols need to be observed religiously in your view. They have been implemented for a reason,” Dorset said. “And because of this perspective, it seems, you and Dr. Gottschalk are at loggerheads.”

“The black race should never be comforted with the notion that they are being treated in the same manner as the Caucasian race,” Dr. Thane said and put his hand down on the desk as if for emphasis. “Even while attempting to modify their bloodlines, they should not be fed the notion that they are in way equal to the white man. You do not lie to them in such a way that would alleviate the notion of their own inferiority. Because such a notion has proven beneficial to the white race beyond measure. You do not provide coons with a sense of self-improvement even as you are taking surreptitious steps to ensure their self-ruin. It’s a counterproductive methodology to say the least. At most it’s a type of race betrayal,” Leo Thane said.

All of this was self-evident to Dr. Thane. No learned person should have found any of these conceits remotely disquieting. Thus, he was troubled when midway through the rationale, Josiah Dorset began to poke around the columns of files as if Thane was not there.

"Something that offends you in my words," Dr. Thane said to himself more or less at this point. "Apparently, I have mouthed a truth of which you are unprepared to incorporate into your Yankee manner of seeing the world."

Soon Josiah Dorset found the file that had been temporarily misplaced under one called *pickled herring*.

To Leo Thane, Josiah Dorset said, "I'm not as hidebound as you think I am, sir. But you don't know who I am or what I am asking of you. Therefore, I'm not really someone that you should be presenting these theories to. You don't know my real mission, and this is not your fault. But you need to see that presently your mission and mine have extraordinarily little in common. We will not be working together. At all. We are not of the same cut, frankly. Therefore, it's not beneficial for you in any way to pretend that we are."

When the interview concluded, Thane refused to shake Josiah's hand.

"I've seen many a pampered Washingtonian crash on the reefs of reality," Thane told him then belatedly thanked him for the smoke. "The fact of the matter is this isn't America, it's Alabama. All your cloak-and-dagger role playing is meaningless down here. It's the heat, you see, that's the great revelator. It takes the black and white and melts it gray."

While Leo remained smoking in the records room, Josiah took his leave. The abrupt manner of his exit, however, carried with it the intimation that he might have had an ulterior motive in talking to Thane in the first place.

This was a bit of knowledge he oughtn't to have broadcasted. Because it only pointed out how wet behind the ears Josiah Dorset was about his new demanding counterintelligence position. He didn't really know how to navigate the wilderness of mirrors he found himself in now. He needed a mentor of some sort. He needed

somebody with a bit of practical field knowledge about lying and getting away with it.

Even then he was self-aware enough to know of his shortcomings. Ten minutes after he left the records room, he was regretful about the abruptness of his exit. He didn't want to make a new enemy. Not so soon anyway. Neither did he want to appear that he was cloaked in mystery. A good spy should have no charisma. He needed to be all but invisible to those he was surveilling. He needed to be both above reproach and beneath it at once.

The problem with being a burgeoning spymaster was that the list of potential confidants was distressingly short. This was when one took into consideration that even an obtuse confession was a potentially treasonous act.

"I'm thirty-three years old with less than six years' experience in the field," Josiah said to a black boy in bib overalls he found wandering around the pasture next to the infirmary twenty minutes or so after he was clear of Dr. Thane's presence. The green solitude of the large pasture attracted Josiah powerfully. When contrasted with the infirmary's cramped aura that was spiced with fetid bandages and rotting paper, it seemed like paradise to Josiah. His office would look out on the pasture if he ever had cause to relocate here. He would leave his windows open and dairy cows would be his agreeable office mates. In winter perhaps a portable stove could be made available for Josiah. To him it was a circumstance that far outstripped his present office-sarcophagus. This was located in the corner of an office building so intentionally non-descript, the mail seldom arrived on time when it arrived at all. In contrast, Josiah didn't think there was an unattractive square centimeter to this pasture. If he could he'd buy it wholesale and build a small cabin in its center. If he could he'd ship every blade of grass back to Washington with him.

Upon seeing Josiah approach from the infirmary's shadow, the colored boy smiled at Mr. Dorset. He offered him a bit of the locally made honey that he was placing in little increments on his fingers from a broken comb the exact shape of a pan flute.

“Tastes different from the store-bought product, I’ll grant you,” Josiah told the colored boy whose name was Henry Worthington. He stared at the brown-yellow gel dripping off his right index finger. Held up in the sunlight, the honey didn’t seem to be honey. More like a mixture of so many organic ingredients churned together into an elixir that if ingested in copious amounts and in a regular basis it would confer immortality. Here was the ambrosia so often referred to in Greek myths. The honey was utterly absent of any corrosive or toxin. Its smoky, slightly bitter taste only confirmed its divine nature to Josiah. It’s medicine not dessert, he realized, as by the fourth finger full he became momentarily ashamed about how greedily he was eating it. He needed to control himself if only for Henry’s edification. Examples needed to be set for the lower classes. If only so that the honey would last, he realized he needed to down it slowly as he might.

Never having tasted honey before straight from the comb Josiah assumed this was the way it would always taste.

“Where did you get this?” he asked Henry Worthington. He had no intention of investigating on his own. Maybe there were beekeepers’ hutches somewhere nearby. From them Josiah might procure a quart or so. If there was a beekeeper about, he would ask him certain things related to the honey’s make-up and production. He would want to know, for example, if there were degrees of excellence to the product. Just like degrees of excellence of wine. He would want to know if this batch might be considered excellent or of some lesser quality.

He assumed there was a whole science behind the practice of mining honey from beehives. He wanted to know a little about it if only for his own edification. He was a gatherer of knowledge, sometimes merely for knowledge’s sake. It was why he was so good at his job.

After asking Henry about his source again, however, he realized that this nigger had no answer on this subject nor any other.

“Let me see up in there,” Josiah Dorset said, as after the third query Henry had opened his mouth and pointed to his upper palate. There, a quarter size hole existed.

This was an uninfected abscess. Which meant likely it was a congenital birth defect. Which was why equally likely Henry had been hanging around the infirmary in the first place. The likes of Dr. Leo Thane had no interest in treating the local populous for free. And if they hadn't been treating Henry, he likely would have been shooed away by now. There was no place amongst these doctors for practicing real medicine. They had foresworn compassion after taking the Hippocratic Oath.

Playacting all that they had been doing to him, Henry Worthington didn't seem to be upset about his treatment at the hands of the white doctors. Him being out here unsupervised indicated to Josiah that they didn't think he was any sort of flight risk at least in the short term. Maybe Henry was just being used as a control subject. He was pantomiming that he was being injected with something. Whatever it was it didn't seem to have put him in a bad way, at least temporarily.

Who knew, however, that if Josiah should come back months later Henry's physical condition might be entirely different. Because of the medication he was being administered.

"If I were you," Josiah said to Henry softly, "I'd find a responsible adult to take you as far away from Alabama as you both can get. Easier said than done of course. You are right. But he was born in hellfire is perhaps not the person to consult about how hot it is. Presently you should be in school and receiving competent medical care. I wager a surgeon in Boston could repair that hole of yours and have you jabbering away in no time. Of course, none of this is your fault. But I'm sure that if you saw the world as I see it there'd be a less sunny disposition to you. By half. You don't know the trouble you've stumbled into, kid. And I'm not allowed to help you even slightly."

Dorset thought that if Henry could lead him towards some manner of local transportation, he could have a stern talk with the parent or guardian who handled his upbringing. In the most tactful way possible he would explain that the syphilis study at the Tuskegee Institute was no longer a place Henry Worthington was allowed to take part in. To the doctors he would make up an excuse

about the boy's absence. He would describe it as the outcome of Henry's insolence when Josiah had met him in the pasture. He would claim he cuffed the boy on the side of head repeatedly and vowed that he should not set foot near the infirmary ever again. In doing so he would suggest that he had conformed to the image of the stern administrator that they had imagined for him. In doing so they would allay their suspicions about Henry's disappearance.

"It's not a digestible story for many involved especially one physician in particular that I have in mind," he said to Henry of the plan "But it's the best I can do now. They'll complain about me, but they'll be doing so through the wrong channels. The long and short of it being they are unaware of the real nature of my visit. The public health system, you see, has been primed to refer all matters related to my tenure with them to my office in Langley. If contacted, the office will produce a cover story and the inquirer's tenure with the department will be terminated because of such insubordination. And if they were to keep at it they will be thrown out of a hotel window on an upper floor. We exist in a free society, friend, but we are not a free society. We've put our freedoms on hold to preserve them. It's a little like the doctors around here freezing specimens for later use."

The dirt road that he and Henry were moving down carried them past pastures exactly like the one that had abutted the infirmary. The heavily shadowed wooden buildings they passed were entirely devoid of address. From the outside it was hard to tell where the Tuskegee Institute began, and the rest of the village left off. The dilapidated architecture stood as passive monuments to a dead era. Josiah suspected that many of the buildings were abandoned. He wondered why the state of Alabama hadn't declared these structures a fire hazard by now and tore the wrecks down. He wondered why prevailing authority didn't simply pull itself up by its own bootstraps and come into the twentieth century.

A lot of firewood there for the grabbing if anybody was so inclined, Dorset thought.

“If you want to show me the source of your magic, son, best assume a slower pace altogether,” Josiah told Henry Worthington. Henry was on the road’s shoulder in front of Josiah moving in a meandering way through occasional thickets. He seemed to be searching out crickets for his supper. He was obviously aware of Josiah’s presence, but he seemed at pains to not look over his shoulder to see if he was keeping up.

A woman with skin so dark it seemed infiltrated with shades of blue was reclined on a half-sunk porch.

“There is no need to be down here,” she said to either of the two, or perhaps both, on seeing them pass her by. At this the corncob pipe in a pocket of her apron was produced. Her gaze was trained at a midpoint between the pair. She didn’t seem prepared to emphasize the point in any way.

Josiah Dorset would beg to differ. Suddenly happy even as the presence of Dr. Gottschalk had yet proven elusive, his journey down here suddenly had seemed a deeply enlightened move. As if the perspective that nature granted him vindicated the decision.

“Decades from now,” he said to silent Henry Worthington, “men will speak of Tuskegee with the same sense of awe that they now hold for Athens.”

The greatness that descended upon men occurred as a historical accident, he thought. And, so, one needed to remain lucky throughout one’s life. There was wretchedness to the ignominy that ordinary men labored under. And, here was T.S. Eliot’s point, it was (mostly) not their fault:

I was neither at the hot gates/
Nor fought in the warm rain/
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass/
Bitten by flies, fought.

The war, however, wherein glory was received was seldom self-chosen. Once engaged, it simply required the consistent application of cruelty amongst the soldiers who fought in it. The soldier needed to harden himself against the misery he was inflicting upon other humans. For when cruelty was engaged in and one remained

indifferent to its effects, one may be assured that glory was his. Victory was a simple mental operation. It was like wiping honey from a broken hive. It doesn’t take any real thought at all.

Beauty in Terror (October 2003)

I.

“It goes like this,” Fred Dressup, the noted Brooklyn-based street performer and freelance journalist, told Valery Song. He began swinging his arms about in a way that suggested a type of Australian Crawl being attempted in midair. This movement he had long ago nicknamed *The Flail*. According to him *The Flail* was an instinctive reaction. It was always attempted to regain some semblance of balance at the outset of a one-way journey down.

Those who tried the Flail were denying the reality of their situation. The Flail was a desperate sort of maneuver performed out of the desire to remain alive for a few more seconds. It was born of irrationality. Therefore, it proceeded in a rote fashion.

“You look at the 134 known jumpers,” Fred said to Valery citing the number of those who had plummeted to their deaths from the WTC on 9/11 as if it was common knowledge. “And there is a ninety percent correlation of movements. From floors ninety to seventy-five the flailing proceeded like clockwork,” he said. He re-enacted the Flail for her. “After which it broke down into various movements mostly born of terror. There are summersaults and swan dives,” he said. “There are several feet first attempts to stay upright like they had intuited some correct body placement was necessary for them to survive the fall.”

When Tower B had just collapsed according to Fred was the point that one would have assumed the rate of

jumpers would have been at its maximum. This was owing to the sudden realization that an attempted rescue from above was futile.

"In fact," Fred said to Valery in between bites, "the rate of jumpers was evenly interspersed throughout the event. They didn't react to their environment the way one assumed they might have," he said. "To me, this demonstrates that they weren't processing the world calmly as they might have. Or they had made up their minds long ago about what it meant to live or die. They were viewing the entire affair as something of an opportunity."

If there was a camera equipped with a powerful enough lens, Fred said, a zoom-in to some of their faces would discover some of them smiling. The ones that were conscious any way could be imagined as smiling Fred said.

"For some of them this was the culmination of many years of serious planning. You'd have to say. For some this was all that life had promised and more."

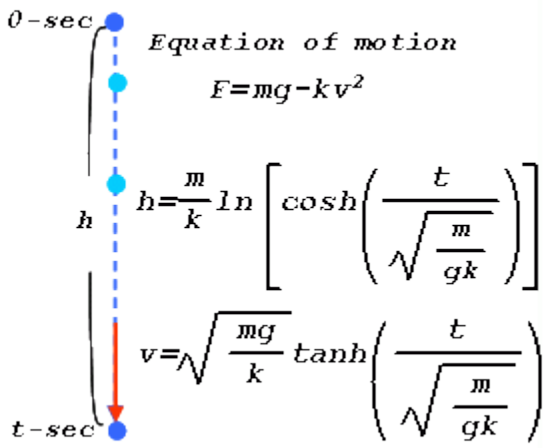
Not to say—heaven forbid—that suicide should be seen as the adoption of just another (albeit short-lived) alternative lifestyle, but the data assiduously collected by Fred Dressup over the past year indicated that this might be the case.

"Put it like this, many of them were out there for a specific reason," he said to Valery and considered the Vietnamese sandwich between them. This *bánh mì* had had a not inconsiderable kick to it. It had taken several moments after it started before Fred could even describe it. The peppers in particular were not of this earth. They should probably have been considered inedible. Something about their fibrous nature coupled with their capsaicin level was proving intolerable to Fred at the moment. The hole in the wall Lower East Side restaurant that made the ham *bánh mì* proudly advertised the sandwich's noxious powers. *Not For Pussies* advised its menu next to the item with a hairless vagina displayed next it to it for visual oomph. As if one was in the midst of questioning what a pussy was. It was one of those type of establishments whose marketing efforts were directed towards especially licentious seventeen-year-

olds. The place was tailored made for hipsters though many of these had long since decamped across the Brooklyn Bridge even before the towers fell. Fred Dressup himself was a Flushing Avenue resident since 1994. He had ridden the B-Train in for this meeting. Very few people that he associated with lived in Manhattan anymore. Nowadays he could spend months on end in Brooklyn without having the need to cross the river.

Times changed. Fred Dressup had undertaken this book project because times changed He wanted to crystallize a historical moment for future generations to peruse. He wanted to preserve a bit of shared experience for the world from the corrosive effects of time on the collective memory.

"*Sixteen Seconds*," he said to Valery Song when asked for a working title of his book. This according to him was the average (past two decimal places) travel time for a jumper from initial free fall unto impact. No math was necessary for the number's derivation. Fred had simply purchased a digital stopwatch and observed the available evidence. But if you wanted math, he told her, here it was:



Where height is assumed at 1380 feet and the jumper assumed as a 180-pound male (m) five feet eleven inches who performed The Flail down to floor seventy-five and summersaulted down the rest of the way. Thereby he created a slight downdraft around his

body and increased his descent by an entire eight tenths of a second as opposed to going feet first with hands placed at his sides.

In the span of sixteen seconds, Fred said to Valery, a particularly fast man could run a hundred seventy-five yards. Which was also the exact distance traveled by a call to prayer voiced over a loudspeaker at a madras wherein the average person could still perceive it, and respond or not respond accordingly.

“I have it all down pat,” he had said to her in that unique outer borough/Australian Gold Coast accent of his while in Lafayette Publishing’s lobby as they waited for a meeting room to come open. The *bánh mì* was still in his backpack waiting to be consumed. Hindsight being twenty-twenty he should have thrown the goddamned thing in the garbage while at street level. He was a pussy apparently in his early middle age. He was somebody for whom milquetoast was invented.

The sandwich affected his sinuses. It sent Fred digging for the balled-up handkerchief in his corduroy jacket pocket. It should be asked why in a business meeting he would resort to stuffing his face? This was a only mystery for somebody foreign to Fred Dressup’s eccentric bearing. The book in question he was pitching was an odd ball’s handiwork. It was obviously written for other odd balls. Perhaps he had the need to play up to or down to his reputation. Valery Song saw him eyeing the *bánh mì* and insisted he imbibe. She hadn’t anticipated this meeting lasting longer than two hours but it was hard to say. She wouldn’t want to ruin a man’s lunch just because propriety demanded it. She didn’t want to alienate him even though she perceived him as a dry well.

Around the time when Fred would return to his Fort Greene neighborhood, the sandwich’s peppers would have migrated past the point in Fred’s lower GI tract where it could began to affect the tissues and nerves it encountered.

“I do not by and large consider myself a person with an extremist way of thinking,” Fred said to Valery. He finished off the last bite that remained on the wax paper that was part of the sandwich’s ironic packaging. Well,

the damage was done to his innards though he wasn't fully aware of this yet. He wasn't yet fully aware of his innards' fragile state. Fred's drug and booze binging of the past fifteen years had left him in an delicate condition. His liver was an old soldier at this point whose outlook was dutiful but befogged. Many millions of Fred's brain cells had been sacrificed unto Bachus, the cruel god of wine.

Fred Dressup saw himself as rock and roll down to his pointy toed boots. He emulated and very much admired the career of his fellow Aussie, Nick Cave. But he lacked the vital charisma needed to pull it off. His own songs never rose far above self-pity when aspiring to a poeticized version of the blues, unlike Nick Cave. He was too inward looking on stage, too shy to ever be considered the type of rock shaman he imagined himself whether sober or wasted. The music was inside him, but it was what was outside that counted in this life. There was something crucially flawed in his execution. He couldn't shout the blues with enough authority to convince himself that he belonged on stage to begin with.

The Vietnamese sandwich from the Lower East Side was a rock-and-roll sandwich in Fred's reckoning. It was eaten by a rock shaman amid meeting for a literary project that was so rock and roll that it might as well have come with an appendix listing drug rehab facilities on the last page and a quarter scotch-taped to the inside flap for a prison phone call just in case all other alternatives were exhausted.

"If you ask me for my opinion of the book, what it's about," he said to Valery Song, "I will answer something like *defiance in the face of certain extinction*. It's a tribute to those 134 individuals who had taken control of their own destiny at a moment. They were driven to it, of course. But they each had decided to control the manner of their demise. In this aspect they triumphed over their murderers. They had a choice to make independent of Al Qaeda manipulation and so they chose. There was a triumphalism, an ultimate freedom in their common journey onto the Turtle Bay pavement. Nobody thereafter would ever make the claim for them as pure

victims. It was a bittersweet triumph they endured. But, nevertheless, their flights will be remembered when the entire cause of Osama Bin Laden will be utterly forgotten even amongst the Muslim hordes."

In sixteen seconds, according to Fred Dressup, the Lepton Epic of the early universe had already ended and the Photon Epic was well underway. In sixteen seconds a particularly fast-talking person could completely mouth several relevant biblical psalms such as psalm 69 and have time for a heartfelt amen before going splat on any piece of New York City pavement. Any number thoughts could be initiated and completed in sixteen seconds. This included the one in which a man commended his soul into the hands of God.

According to Fred Dressup, sixteen seconds was the exact period wherein certain species of Cray supercomputers could solve deeply complex fluid flow equations relating to the sun's final expansion. This was the period in which the earth would be swallowed whole and disintegrate without a trace for eternity. He had painstakingly researched all these facts. He knew of what he spoke when he spoke of such matters.

"They actually have worked out the exact date when it will occur, the earth's end," he said to Valery Song noting the exact page where he wanted this tidbit to go in the book. *Sixteen Seconds* would not be a coffee table read precisely. Not as Fred imagined it (though Lafayette Press would certainly have their say about this). Rather, it would enter the culture as a type of samizdat, a sort of heretical text passed from one reader to the next in generally shuttered rooms until authority's iron heel descended and crushed everything and everyone in sight. He imagined that once published various agents from the national security council and the CIA would be beating a path to his Fort Greene studio apartment. There would be nothing treasonous in *Sixteen Seconds*. But he was sure they would find the book objectionable regardless and try to suppress it. There was only so much truth telling allowed by a single individual at a single time in this country. Fred did not for a single second believe in a 9/11 conspiracy. There were some subjects, however, so touchy that even ordinary

reportage would prove politically fraught. Fred didn't consider America a democracy any longer. Rather, it was in a fluid, constantly recalibrating state between a free society and a twenty-first century version of totalitarianism. He didn't know what to call it yet. He wasn't so well versed in political science that he could coin a meaningful word as it related to what it was he was experiencing,

The jumpers were jumpers, according to Fred, only because they possessed the courage to do just this. Because of this attribute they were all heroes and worthy of veneration. In an obtuse way *Sixteen Seconds* was a first attempt at veneration. The modern version of sanctity was the suicide executed in advance of the mass murder. Fred Dressup had no intention of indulging in hagiography. He felt an objective accounting about the jumpers' last sixteen seconds would stand as tribute enough. People could infer the heroism in the involuntary act of falling as they saw fit. They could ask themselves what they would do at the exact moment as the flames approached the ninety-fourth story and the broken window yawned open like a proverbial mouth of hell. Some entered the mouth and perished as heroes. Some didn't and for these there was no record about the way they died. There was likely extreme agony involved. The smoke by that time had made breathing impossible. And well before the building's steel skeleton had started to collapse bodies burned. But there was no reliable testimony possible about their demise. The rescue helicopters arriving within the first hour that were intended to save them had long since disappeared beyond the smoky horizon. They all knew that they were going to die. But somehow the jumpers were the only ones to take proactive measures. They had commended themselves into the hands of the Lord sixteen seconds in advance. For this they were heroes to Fred. They acted. And in this willfulness humanity was affirmed. In a hopeless situation where the sense of powerlessness was pervasive, they enforced the terms of their demise. They were powerful in the face of disaster.

Who among us now, Fred Dressup said to Valery Song gesturing around the Lafayette Publishing office

visible through the meeting room's glass window, could claim that she would have the courage to act as the hundred and thirty two jumpers acted when faced with the plunge down?

"Myself I am an in-bred coward," Fred said to Valery. "I've inherited the trait from my mostly missing father who left my mother when I was ten. This was in what was to her a foreign country," he said. "Dad left and I was full of fear."

And fear, he said, was a seed that once planted sprouted mightily yet invisibly. Only when tested could a man ascertain the corruption within him. 9/11 was such a test. Some passed, some failed. And there was no grading on a curve.

Fred Dressup wiped the snot on his shirtsleeve before continuing.

"You could imagine," he said, "that at some point it was every man for himself. Men had broken windows likely to breathe a little better temporarily. There were hundreds likely equipped with mobile phones and they knew their fate was sealed. They would have been told how pervasive the fire was for so many floors below. They would have been informed maybe even by the fire department themselves that rescue for them was impossible and they should write their final thoughts down and attach them to objects that they could throw out the window to be reclaimed at some future point."

It took a lot of courage to jump, Valery Song thought. But, then again, it certainly took courage not to jump as well. At least so it was her uninformed opinion.

"How can you be so sure what went on up there?" she asked Fred who was far stranger in person than on the phone. "How can you be sure it was a conscious decision on their part to jump and not some panic induced madness? They thought maybe they could crawl out there and find a drainpipe or something from which they could crawl to safety. At a time like that," she said to him, "they were all simply trying to stay alive. So, it's hard to say, isn't it, what was on their mind at the time. Short of telling their own story every falling body is like an inkblot where you can graft on any sort of meaning that you want. It doesn't mean anything by itself. Or

maybe it means so many things it's impossible to say. But it's a tribute that we're trying to come up with, a meaningful story of courage. And I can see you've done a great deal of work up until this moment to get us halfway there. We have a layout for the book in mind that we think will serve your purpose well. We have discovered several names that can be attached to many of the falling people. They are working with our legal department to make sure that there has been no attempt to copywrite these images on the victim's behalf."

Valery and her boss had actually finalized the book layout before this meeting. It involved doling out Dressup's storehouse of video captures and speculation in half second installments until the moment of impact.

"We need a human touch," was how Valery phrased Lafeyette's requirements for Fred's original book proposal. "We're not interested in the science of *Sixteen Seconds* so much as how people could sympathize with the victims before they died. You delve into the mechanics of falling as much as you want but there is no answer to the question of why they were there in the first place. I don't think anybody could answer so much why they were there in the place. In a way it's none of our business to ask the question. Or even provide an answer."

Valery Song meant this deeply. Thus, she was somewhat irritated with Fred when he began to disagree.

"All that the universe is," he told her as a reply, "is a grouping of facts perceived in some order by those that lack omniscience. In the universe there's nothing that should be thought about beyond the facts or the physics of a given situation. It's not that it's beyond our understanding," he said. "It's that there's nothing to understand. There is no such thing as truth," he said and took a bite of the Vietnamese sandwich. It burned going down. But, then again, there was no such thing as truth. Therefore, pain was an illusion and could be shuffled off. It was simply an activating of various nerve endings. It was simply an utterance, devoid of real language and therefore gibberish. It could be bent into whatever meaning one wanted. It was a clattering of baboons on

the primordial African plain. They had no idea why they vocalized. Their screams never rose to anything like philosophical clarity.

The way to solve a mystery was to first deny that there's any mystery. After which you can proceed to arrange a bunch of found facts in a pleasing order to make it appear profound.

"It's all of intellectual history," he said to her. "This lie of a discovered profundity."

Fred's point to Valery was that all his supposedly bizarre facts concerning what could take place in sixteen seconds (that's how long it took most mammalian species to complete coitus) were the book's true genius. Or its true backbone more modestly. Fred Dressup wanted to establish the sojourn of the 134 jumpers from both WTC towers on that day as simply another physical event, not differing in cosmic importance whatsoever from two howler monkeys getting it on in a glen. The pain was taken away once spied through the lens of scientific process. In real science, there were no moral conclusions to be formulated. Things happened not through some Manichean demonstration of will but rather due to the interplay of physical laws on bits of matter. One couldn't tell really when it was exactly time to mourn. From the perspective of the scavengers of New York the apparition of so many dead sacks of meat falling from the sky was a joyous thing to behold, for example. Almost miraculous. Thus, the way to rationalize all human suffering was to consider things in progressively less human terms altogether. Warmth and fuzziness only led to further questions posed to a silent God about why all this was so. Nothing ever came from compassion. It was mere ritual finally that demeaned its participants even as it frustrated them, too.

In Fred Dressup's view, far from embracing a nihilistic worldview, this dispassionate approach was the way to achieve spiritual harmony (if something short of nirvana).

"We need to reconcile ourselves to the fact that inside we are less than perfectible creatures," Fred Dressup said to Valery Song. He was implying that the only way happiness was achieved in this life was through

the consistent lowering of expectations. So, his project would involve the exercising of a type of fairy tale magic run in reverse where flesh would return to wood or some sort of Adamic clay eager for the artist's hand. He truly thought common men would be happier to have this happen. He couldn't imagine the anguish that would befall them otherwise. He couldn't imagine constantly having to throw one's hands up to the sky and ask how it was that this was allowed to occur.

In his street act Fred was constantly performing varieties of the same worthless alchemy.

"I used to get 'em in headlocks," he recalled for Valery Song citing one example of his "art" wherein innocent bystanders were forced to react to his presence. "I'd say to them 'Why isn't anybody out here helping you like you thought they would?'" he said. "'I'm attacking you and look all these people are just walking away. They're doing everything to avoid eye contact with us like they're pretending they haven't seen us. They don't even have the guts to admit to themselves what's going on, let alone intervene.' I'd point out to them that this was the case. Then I'd ask how it is mankind could claim itself to be evolved beyond the most advanced ape. I don't see any of it myself personally," Fred said. "I don't see any sense of divinity or even basically civility in those who claim themselves to be so much more evolved than the creatures they share the planet with."

This straight shooting was out of character for him. Simply because Fred had always claimed to have no real convictions about anything or anyone. He considered himself a hip investigator in the fun house mirror of his own self-perception, a dispassionate scientist devoid of philosophy so completely that he couldn't even create rational hypotheses about so many of his findings. His favorite phrase in the English language, he constantly averred, was *I don't know*. Ask him about anything and he would tell you *I don't know*. It was what made him so great, according to him. He was the only non-Muslim commentator, for example, not expressing outrage over 9/11. He was the last cool-headed man, the last one to have escaped from the prejudices of the age. He thought himself great while others were merely fairly good. He

thought himself just about ready for his bust in bronze and the requesting of his papers by various Ivy League institutions fascinated by his mental processes and his allegiance to reason.

Home for Fred Dressup was a five hundred square foot walk up on Flatbush Avenue. The place was overcrowded with the DVDs and videocassettes that he had either made himself from the twenty-four-hour world news cycle or had been made for him by other sources with access to foreign satellite dishes. These were the source material for all his 9/11 images. Many of them had been recorded in the event's first few hours. This was when editorial discretion had not yet been allowed to overtake the public right's to know.

"All during the attacks," he told Valery Song and others at his initial pitch meeting when *Sixteen Seconds* was still in consideration, "I was racing back and forth from my local home electronics store to purchase additional TV's."

According to Fred, at one point there were nine different camera crews on scene. Initially they thought the first airplane slamming into the towers to be an accident. They were covering it as a type of human tragedy like an Oklahoma tornado.

Some of the tapes had been donated to him by amateur videographers such as the many tourists who had arrived on scene downtown with their camcorders once the horror started in earnest.

"I put an ad out in the *The Village Voice* calling for these," he had told Valery in answer to a direct question. "I told them I'd give them credit in the book if it ever came out. Which it looks like now it will."

Unbeknownst to Lafayette Publishing, Fred had stolen an expensive device from Fordham University that converted the videotaped information into digital code. From there he was able to transfer various stills into high-res bitmap captures. Going against his promise several weeks ago he had already copy-written hundreds of them. The book was all his idea and he wanted to gain some credit for his work. They could hire a lawyer if they were upset with him. He really hadn't imagined there'd be much money to go around anyway from this project.

He thought being selected by the Oprah Book Club was out of the question once the bit about what was experienced by a jumper at the moment of impact was read by whatever reviewer made these judgments on behalf of Ms. Winfrey's organization.

"The common question is if they felt anything at impact," Fred had told all assembled at the Lafayette pitch. "The question assumes the speed of death or the trauma inflicted on the nervous system would be enough to overcome the speed of the body's pain receptors firing. The facts are that depending on how they landed and at what speed they might have remained alive for as long as ten seconds after collision. The body is mostly made of water, you should know. And when it collides with something substantial it goes splat like a water balloon rather than break apart in a thousand pieces as if made of glass. At high speeds the tissue ruptures and is rent from the bones in a concentric pattern. The bones shatter and the skeleton begins to fold up into itself like a collapsible table. All this is to say is that you have a huge mess on your hands and death or even the point at which the experience of pain is impossible is wildly variant from person to person. The spinal cord in almost every instance is destroyed but that doesn't preclude the experience of phantom pain so-called through the aegis of the mind. At least until the point that the brain death occurs there is a possibility that an individual is fully aware of his or her predicament. Jumpers lay there in an organic pool of their former forms and try to twitch a finger. They're deaf and blind but this only likely increases their fear and isolation. They don't know if they're alive or dead. And when they try to scream, and no sound is produced it's doubly confusing for them likely. It's a true nightmare until they finally die in earnest. Just a few seconds. But it could be experienced over what feels like the course of weeks or hours because the sense of time that each of us possess is so keyed into bodily processes."

Fred's scientific rationale for making this claim was haphazard at best. Valery Song was right to consider him a crank.

“Science has its uses and abuses,” she had said to her boss Krantz after the pitch meeting when trying to damp down enthusiasm for the project. None of Dressup’s pseudo-science would make it into the book even if it was published. She was surprised that it had been greenlit by Joe Krantz to begin with. According to Joe, there was a potential new audience of paranoids and depressives, post-9/11, that needed be tapped into if Lafayette was to limp along for another decade. Just like it had for the decade leading up to this one. The formerly meaningful phrase “of publishable quality” regarding a particular author’s output was now routinely trotted out as a punchline at water cooler moments like the one Valery was in the midst of. The editorial meeting with Fred Dressup had ended in stalemate. He simply had repeated incessantly his vision for *Sixteen Seconds* as a counterpoint to all of Valery’s objections. He seemed to be in the midst of forming a new religion based wholly on scientific dispassion. But this mission statement didn’t jibe with any sort of market niche. Valery felt it part of her job as senior editor to articulate this.

He was in most respects the strangest man she had ever met.

“He rolled up his sleeve at one point to scratch an itch,” Valery said to her officemate Marta Trask in the office kitchen twenty minutes after he had left, “and on the inside of his arm were rows of nicotine patches spreading from his wrist down to his elbows,” she said.

“Not a few patches,” she said to Marta using her own forearm as a prop, “but overlapping rows of them like roof shingles,” she said. “It must have delivered sixty times the recommended dose,” she said to Marta, recalling her own recent use of the product when trying to quit. “It must have been close to giving him a type of nicotine IV,” she said before wondering if that was even possible. “And that that was only the exposed arm that I saw. Maybe he had these all over his body. Probably he’s addicted to the patches, and it gives him a buzz. So this is why he acts the way he does. But he doesn’t act like he’s buzzed really. He acts like he’s slightly retarded. Or maybe as if he has some sort of emotional impairment and lives with his mother or something. He seems

somebody that needs taking care of," she said to Marta. "Like maybe a recent escapee of a mental institution. To me, he's not normal."

According to Marta Trask, one of Fred's street performances had ended with his arrest when he had put a headlock on a plainclothes police officer.

"I'm surprised you didn't know that," she said to Valery and looked around the Lafayette kitchen for a bit of non-dairy creamer. No milk, let alone cream anymore around here. Unless you happened to bring your own which was cheating. She should have remembered to bring her own for the whole office. Not doing so was a habit that she couldn't seem to break. She should have remembered that the days in publishing wherein ordinary things were given to you were long gone. You had to do for yourself when it came to small matters. And this she found endlessly annoying for reasons that it was hard for her to pinpoint by herself.

In the old days at Lafayette (which was to say what she considered to be the *really* old days at Lafayette during the 1960s) a young man in a white hat would come around to everybody's desk at closing time and take your breakfast order for the next day. No kitchens necessary back then. But, then again, the secretaries always prepared a freshly brewed pot at the ready out front. Thet served it to guests and visiting authors in fine glassware bought from Sax Fifth Avenue. One lump or two, whichever way you liked it. Everybody had taken the coffee pot for granted. It simply blended in with the scenery. It She believed it would be there for as long as Lafayette was in business.

Perks like cream in your coffee were so taken for granted by Marta Trask that she would never think to imagine a time when they would be taken away. It was just part of the background noise of the place. Along with the complimentary rides to and from work during bad weather and the free office Christmas party held at the Stork Club during Marta's first year at Lafayette. This was in 1963. Sam Cooke provided the evening's musical entertainment.

Norman Mailer was one of Lafayette's prominent authors in those days, Marta recalled, and had arrived at

the Christmas party in a blue-black tux that was the same color scheme as the shiner under his right eye. His Puerto Rican wife Adele was in tow behind him. He, not Adele, dominated the gathering. Marta recalled him holding court on the flaws of the recently deceased JFK. People were in a mood then to let go their grief over the assassination. They wanted to hear that life would go on. They were open to Mailer's contention that Kennedy would not be missed.

"In those days it was very much a prestige business," Marta told Valery Song of the publishing industry. According to her, workers on Mad Avenue and Wall Street grew jealous when you told them you were a fiction editor at one of the big houses.

"All the junior editors that started here were recruited from the Ivy League," she told Valery. "We had our pick of the litter," she said. "We could hire who we saw fit."

According to Marta, in those days certain young men were fueled with such a fierce literary ambition that they would work for almost nothing just to get their foot in the door. The main difference between then and now, she said, was that now most of the young people you she saw in Lafayette's hallways were filled merely with ordinary levels of greed. They were using Lafayette and maybe the publishing industry in general as a steppingstone to bigger and better things. They wanted to go to work in television for example in some executive capacity. They became disappointed early in their stay here. There were no opportunities for media synergy. Nowadays, the publishing industry had as little in common with the television industry as a tadpole had with a scorpion. Nowadays, a headhunter from CBS for example would look at the editor position on some bright young things resume and roll their eyes. The young didn't understand the lay of the land. They didn't understand that the entirety of the book buying public was an island slowly sinking into the surrounding icy ocean. Within fifty years it would be entirely submerged altogether.

"When I speak of industry prestige," Marta Trask said to Valery, "I don't mean that any of us got rich," she

said. “I mean to say that we believed that we were doing important work. Our work was important because we believed that it had lasting value. We didn’t think for a second a tornado would happen by and destroy it all. We couldn’t imagine a situation like we have now where eight out of ten college graduates don’t read books at all.”

The prestige drained out of the industry, she said, when what money that was in it drained out years before.

“It’s pathetic that this is so,” she said to Valery. “We weren’t the bright and shining diamonds we advertised ourselves as,” she said. “We were after the money by-and-large just like Wall Streeters. But unlike them we weren’t so good at acquiring it. We were at cross-purposes with our own stated reason for working in publishing. This made us incompetent in many areas, not least of which was the ability to sort out what one desired from what one spoke about so desirously at Upper West Side cocktail parties and at coffee houses in the Village.”

Marta Trask was sixty-five this September. Which made her fourteen years older than the next oldest person at this office. She couldn’t conceive how she hadn’t already been fired or furloughed. She didn’t think it had anything to do with her skill as an editor. Every person she had had a long-term relationship with at Lafayette had already been let go years back. This included all of her mentors. She didn’t understand why she was allowed, or rather, condemned to remain. She didn’t understand what was either so special or unfortunate about her that caused her continuous employment through so many decades of decline. She assumed somebody was being vindictive. She assumed merely that she was being goaded into resigning on her own. When she did she would forfeit so much severance pay as forty year employee..

In 1963, the average consumer had a different relationship to books than they had now. At the time at least they gave lip service to treating books more like objects of veneration than the secondary piece of media collateral they are generally considered as today. Many

illiterates had robust libraries back then, if only to forestall the notion that they couldn't read or write. But at least they were buying books. In 1963, a hardbound edition of the collected works of Guy De Maupassant sold over two hundred thousand copies in the United States. Popular writers were minor league celebrities with legitimate followings. They had fan clubs usually administered by their publishers. This was Marta Trask's first job at Lafayette: to oversee the American chapter of the Morris West fan club. A lot of hate mail came Morris' way from true believers. A lot of long nails arrived in small packages with directions on how to drive these into Mr. West's flesh when a moment for true repentance came. Using Mr. West's forged signature, Marta would always answer the hate mail with missives full of bland opprobrium. Nowadays the letter writers would be considered stalkers and reported to the FBI. Mr. West never once gave directions about how any of these should be answered.

"The first Pulitzer-Prize winner I edited," Marta Trask told Valery, "was *Angle of Repose* by Wallace Stegner. That was in 1971."

According to Marta, this was a novel about a historian in a wheelchair who decided to write a book about his relatives as a way of connecting with his roots. She herself didn't consider the book genius-level. But she never once accused Stegner of plagiarism like so many others had later.

Having heard this story for the umpteenth time, Valery Song decided to ask a question.

"Well, did he finally?"

"Did he what, my dear?"

"Did he finally connect with his roots?"

"Oh, I don't recall plots, only faces," Marta said to her. "Just as I don't remember the names of any of my ex-husbands. It's all generic to me at this point anyway," she said. "In every story there's a telling moment where the hero recognizes the error of his ways. For some reason he becomes a better person for it. It's like a wine taster who has lost the affinity for wine by being overexposed to it. Honestly, I don't know! And I have no desire to find out. But you could look it up for yourself on

your lunch break. In the storeroom downstairs there are two cases left over from *Angle of Repose's* final printing in 1984. You could read it and give me, the editor, a book report on how it actually turned out. Because it is my assumption that all stories are fundamentally the same. Fundamentally flawed. They're designed to bribe the reader into considering human affairs from a mole's perspective. From a mole's eye view, we are brilliant and dangerous creatures. Rather like psychotic angels. We transform constantly. And above everything else we are magnificent mysteries. There's nothing dull and ordinary or unimaginative about any of us. Hardly. Our exploits always must be glamorized just to serve the plot."

Marta found Stegner himself to be a deeply unpleasant man and somebody for whom ill-will was cultivated effortlessly.

"He walked around in a bolo tie and a checkered shirt," she said to Valery, "which at that time in New York was like dressing up as Howdy-Doody. So people on the street said things to him and he said things back. Stegner had an abiding hatred for New York which he expressed in so many ways. He had a pronounced limp and was short once with one of our interns. Mr. Krantz the elder I recall was right on the verge of asking him to leave. They weren't aware at the time that his book was going to make them any money. He was wearing out his welcome with us quickly. But if they knew he would have made them money they would have been tolerant with him to a fault."

The reason for such a reminiscence was to point out to Valery Song that even in the old days creeps abounded in the business.

"But it was a wonderful book, he produced despite that I can't remember even a little bit of it," she told her of *Angle of Repose*.

That was the difference between now and then, she said: the actual work. Writers don't write well enough in the present age. In Marta's view this was because their editors didn't demand it of them. So, standards were allowed to slide, knowing that the general reading public had long ago abandoned the need for literary quality. Fred Dressup's *Sixteen Seconds,* for example, was in

Marta's view a publishing gimmick disguised as an avant-garde expose. The author had nothing to say about his subject. Therefore, he was reduced to the tiresome promulgating of facts absent any analysis. He couldn't form a hypothesis about 9/11 because inside he was devoid of the intellectual apparatus to do so. Marta suspected this Fred Dressup wasn't a big reader of books himself. She suspected he didn't have much of an interior life.

There was no scholarship to *Sixteen Seconds* as far as it was described to her. There was no sense of history to it, or forecast provided by the author. Once devoid of historical perspective a person was invariably trapped in the ever expanding moment. It was awful to read let alone experience. But nowadays this was what based for the bleeding edge. Over the past few years, she had constantly seen the stance in young authors. The strategy was simply to deny that there was such a thing as an inner life. By doing so one was able to deny that anything was being missed out on when one elided it from one's literary output.

The sole occasion Marta had been introduced to Fred Dressup he had been nice enough to her. She wasn't singling his book out for excessive criticism.

"The average reader needs to take a stand for quality," she said to Valery Song repeating the oft repeated declaration uttered between Lafyaette editors over the past fifteen years. The problem with this utterance, according to Lafayette's tiny marketing department, was that the average reader in 2003 was somebody for whom books' main purpose was to balance an uneven leg of a coffee table. The books that they used for the effort did the job ably enough. So, there was no complaint about quality coming from them. Those who did read books read what they wanted and took away from it only what they wanted before the book was started. There was no arguing with this desire as it was entirely amorphous. People didn't know themselves anymore. As they didn't know each other. They consumed culture based on entirely exterior criteria. They moved passively like jellyfish following tides and currents to places they couldn't identify. Most people

weren't aware of their predicament. They didn't mourn their degradation as they were largely blind to it. This vague and persistent unhappiness that plagued them throughout their lives could be easily silenced temporarily in so many ways. It never occurred to them that they were victims of a social movement wherein empty sensation was prized over everything else.

In Marta's view, young editors should be required to know the type of business they were heading into as a condition for employment. They should be made to take a test about the current state of the publishing industry just like they would when attempting to gain a driver's license.

As far as the publication of *Sixteen Seconds* went Marta Trask offered the unsolicited advice to Valery that its cover would be all important.

"They don't care about the little black symbols on the page anymore, your target audience," she told Valery about the demographic of college-age hipsters that Fred Dressup's book would invariably be marketed toward. "With them it needs to be consumed whole within the blink of an eye. Even forty seconds of dallying —and I read this in one of the marketing journals—will be too much for them. They shut off after that time completely. After forty seconds you've lost them. They lack the patience to read books even halfway. They use books mostly I'm assuming as a spur to attract the opposite sex. They go to Starbucks with an important looking book and put it on the table in front of them. They tell you they're reading it but if you ask them about it in any depth they have no idea what it's about. They flatter themselves that they're smart for being a reader of important books. It's what our main job is around here, it's what the industry has turned into. It's just an aid to pitching woo. It's the same as if we were marketing a type of club membership. It's a way for people to distinguish themselves from the dating crowd. They don't have any affinity at all for the written word. They don't look upon books with the reverence that they deserve."

The cover was all important according to Marta simply because for so many that was the book's entire selling point.

"You have a close-up of a head and shoulders maybe," Marta Trask said once having taken a gander at some of the *Falling Man* stills that Valery still had under her arm. "Then you overlay the text underneath. There should be no reference to what they're looking at in the stills. It could be somebody experiencing a surprise birthday party for all they know," she said. "You stare at the blurry face and it's obviously in distress. But that's all you know. Because maybe it turns out it's a happy face. At a point I'm guessing there's no difference between joy and terror. People's bodies push a button for them and they figure out later what it is supposed to mean They don't know if they're happy or sad from one moment to the next. I've been married three times so I'm speaking here from experience," Marta told her. "You don't know what you're in the midst of until it's passed you by and then the experience cannot be recaptured accurately anyway. You corrupt your own history simply by trying to remember it. You're lost in the world, but you don't know this. You're too sad to be tragic really. You're funny really because you think of your life as some great story unfolding in stages. You cannot even say for sure why you chose what you ate for breakfast that day."

Think of a number to pitch to sales to soften the blow when the book tanks inevitably, Marta said to Valery. A first print run of four thousand copies (including the complementary copies handed out to 9/11 first responders and so on to engender good will) would be a good number to promote internally. That would produce a remainder rate of only sixty percent and a loss of only sixteen thousand dollars assuming the author's advance is repaid. In today's publishing environment this could be reasonably interpreted as an acceptable performance for *Sixteen Seconds*. It would be good enough to propose a second printing arguing that the book showed promise in key demographics. There was no chance of that happening, but it would be good enough at least to make the argument and demonstrate to Krantz that the

editor's job was competently performed. *Sixteen Seconds* was a coffee table book written for manic depressives. There was no real way to polish a turd to use the familiar adage. The upper management at Lafayette Publishing was aware of this at some level and would respond gently to the bad numbers. It was Marta Trask's belief that they had no answer for what ailed their industry. They certainly had put no stock into Fred Dressup's abilities as a rainmaker.

"We're all just so many rats waiting for the exterminator's wand," was how Marta put it to Valery Song while making an elaborate gesture with one hand. She talked like this out in the open nowadays because she didn't give a damn anymore if they fired her. Really deep down she wanted to be fired. She was well past her expiration date. She was out of place here. As she had no further ambition at a remove from the publishing industry. This was the only job she had ever had and it would stay that way. Permanently. She assumed her continuous enforced presence here was a spiteful trick played by Krantz as payback for unspecific grievances. Once in the early seventies Krantz had made a pass at her that she declined. She assumed he was drunk at the time and neither of them had mentioned anything about it later. It could have been that she had simply been forgotten and was allowed to stay as a pure oversight. Maybe she didn't even count enough to be disposed of by HR. She was like a balled-up Kleenex at the bottom of a purse that was allowed to remain for so many years. But now if they let her go, she would initiate an age discrimination suit regardless of the payout they dangled in front of her. She had already contacted an attorney who specialized in such matters just for this eventuality. She was raring to go.

The tiny Upper West Side apartment that Marta had lived in ever since her third divorce was rent controlled. As such, it had long since slipped into disrepair.

"It's all of a piece the way they treat us, the way they ignore us and try to pretend like we don't even exist and do nothing for us because we don't exist," Marta said to her little dog Goethe several hours later while strolling Central Park. It was a nice enough day for late

fall and she didn't see the impropriety even slightly in talking to a dog like it was a wise and understanding human being.

All people had their predilections, and this was Marta Trask's.

She didn't think that Goethe understood her. She didn't think that it was prepared to in some doggy kind of way to answer back. She did think that a type of emotional bond had formed between them that allowed her to communicate her feelings with him. When she was sad, for example, the dog—who was a mix of corgi and Jack Russell terrier—stared up at Marta in a particularly sympathetic way with a slightly cocked head and upturned ears. In the aftermath of some emotional outburst of Marta's, Goethe would come and lay its head on her lap as if in an attempt to comfort non-verbally. Often as not it did the trick with her at least temporarily. She wouldn't ask for any emotional support from a real human being. Besides her three ex-husbands who were *persona non grata* to her, Marta's two children, John and Electra, were also lost to her. At least when it came to matters of the heart they were. She would get birthday cards from one or both of them when that time of the year rolled around, as well as flowers from John on Mother's Day that came with a generic greeting card. She had driven them both away, she supposed, with her moodiness. Marta didn't think despite objective evidence to the contrary that she was hard to live with. She had friends in the building, for example. She thought Valery Song liked her, even though she kept on antagonizing her with her views about the publishing industry. Well, if Valery was upset with Marta for speaking the truth that was too bad. Valery was still young, and she needed to know the truth about her career. She had taken up residence on a sinking ship. She was smart and, if she wanted, she could make a lateral move into another business and leave her cares and concerns (at least Marta imagined that this was so) behind her. She didn't understand really why Valery hadn't made the move yet The smell of the rotting books being slowly devoured by silverfish in the remainder rooms was appalling to her and would stay with her until the day she died. She

couldn’t imagine how Valery could not comment on the smell of it. A bright person would get a single whiff of it and decide immediately that he or she was in the wrong business entirely.

Marta didn’t think despite all her melancholy that she was anybody’s victim.

“This is the way life goes,” she said to Goethe and began to walk down the park’s west side. She realized that if money was important to her she would have stayed married to husband number one. Though a philanderer, he was an investment banker from a wealthy family. Others thought much could be ignored when it came to matters of long-term financial stability. They thought she could for example take a lover herself.

She could have hired a private detective and caught husband number one in the act and sued for divorce on aggrieved terms which in those days in the State of New York made all the difference.

As it was, his lawyer had been an expert at such proceedings and managed to hide an enormous portion of his money away from the inspection of the court.

“Forty thousand dollars and an agreement of deferred alimony,” Marta told Goethe who much to his credit wasn’t really listening. “I was so upset I turned the alimony down. I went to work at Lafeyette. And for the first thirty years working there I never regretted a thing. But, sweetie, realize everything grows darker given time. You don’t turn down free money in this life based on principle. You state your principle but keep the money as you do. Money and principle. You’re talking about two different things really and they’re not remotely related. Now it doesn’t make sense to me what I did. I was delusional maybe just like my friend Valery. I didn’t have much of a head on my shoulders in those days.”

Goethe perhaps thought *this is true about you now*. Soon the dog collapsed on a haunch on the black pavement. He began to lick himself, marveling at this sudden and fleeting intellectual outburst. A microsecond after it had come upon him it was gone. Here was a bit of speaking in tongues, doggy-style. It came and went ignorant of logical concern. And science had no explanation for it.

He would never look back at that moment in either wonder or askance. He was a dog and as such saw little need of either wonder or askance. He yearned and he grieved. But unlike humans he never saw the temptation to reflect on these emotions. They were a part of him merely just like his itchy skin. He didn't see himself as at a remove from his feelings. He was childish and loving just as the Good Lord had made him.

"I wish I was like you," Marta told her dog Goethe after his ritual licking stopped. She watched Goethe sniff at something dead in the damp grass just under a park bench for several minutes.

Maybe Marta Trask truly wished she could be like her dog for a little while. Ten minutes might be enough to recalibrate her priorities past the point where she wasn't so gloomy. Afterwards she could wipe the spittle off her own genitalia and live her life more in concert with the joyful demeanor the merciful creator designed us all to live. She could be free of the gloom that dominated her life since husband number three walked out on her and left her all alone.

Look, it's hard being living nowadays when so much of life was polluted by fear and revisionist history. We, the American People, were not the blameless angels we once imagined ourselves to be. According to so many we were in the midst of getting exactly what we had coming to us. And when society crumbled and the memory of America was not a cause for celebration but a cause for garden variety commiseration mixed with outrage, a cycle would be completed and the span of America's long forgotten victims finally provided with a proper eulogy absent of the comfort of religious belief.

"You look over there, south past midtown, and the common misperceptions of ten million human sheep are waiting to be eradicated," a self-titled Prophet Without Honor spoke to Marta Trask and Goethe. He pointed south with one bony finger as if a Biblical prophet pointing out the direction of Canaan to a nomadic tribe. According to the Prophet, 9/11 was an event of supreme triviality. This was because it was so long overdue that its shock value had been blunted invariably by the delay. What mattered most to him was the fact that the WTC

wasn’t there any longer, that it had disappeared from the earth completely. Now people were aware of the fragility of the structures that surrounded them in this city. New Yorkers needed to prepare for the end he said not because the end was nigh but because it was at such a far remove that it was only through imagination that a person would recall it.

He didn’t mention this to Marta. He didn’t mention it due to his sense of triumph. As if he was some type of James Bond villain taking glee in the downfall of nations. More so (and merely), he felt that all the talk of societal change was entirely overblown. Because it only confirmed in the minds of all those paying attention what should have been known already.

“Myself I took a long nap and watched cartoons the whole day after,” the Prophet, whose name was Abraham Minkowski, said to Goethe in particular and removed his self-identifying label from the front of his bare chest. It was hard for him to say why he was out here in Central Park bare chested on such a cold day. The reason he self-identified as a prophet without honor was that all the truths he spoke in those days were known in advance by his audience. He shouldn’t have received any credit for some sort of revelatory set of ideas when he was simply spurring memory on. He thought of himself as a civil servant whose job was to give a realistic accounting of the world as it stood. It was a humble job, but he vowed to do it to the best of his abilities. And until his tolerance of the cold was at an end. He didn’t think it was for him alone to perform. There could have been as many as a thousand prophets without honor standing here in the park as far as Abe was concerned. There was nothing special about him. They all could have done the work in one hour shifts until they were satisfied that their mission was complete.

How did the prophets of the Bronze Age, Minkowski always wondered, managed to know when enough was enough? Quite possibly they would have benefited from some training regarding the style of their prophesying. This was prior to them getting in trouble from local authorities. Abe, whenever the first cop directed him to leave, would leave forthwith, without so much as a nasty

word. He was a Prophet Without Honor, recall. Which meant that he lacked any pretensions about being beloved by the community he served. He had a job to do, and he was desirous of doing it efficiently as possible. His room was uptown in what used to be Spanish Harlem, but lately the neighborhood had taken to calling itself something different. As if it could disown its own ethnic history with a single marketing push.

The Prophet Without Honor did not care. He knew what the overseers of the city had coming to them regardless of such efforts. He knew that the fate of the WTC was their fate. He knew they wouldn't have to worry about what to call the city's various neighborhoods once the inevitable occurred. This was neither good nor bad, as far as he was concerned. To him it was merely the truth. He was weirdly passive in the face of his own testimony. He thought his own words were entirely beside the point. Which was deeply strange for somebody in his line of work.

Most self-styled prophets whether they were honorable were all about the hard sell. They generally believed themselves to be the most consequential human beings to ever walk the earth. And for good reason. Unlike Abe Minkowski's presentation, there was not even an ounce of irony to their presentation.

"Just point your face south to New York Harbor," he said to Marta Trask, "and think about what was there two years ago and what is there now."

No need to consider the scene for more than a few seconds, however, because the truth was so obvious that it did not need to be elaborated on for any extended period.

"I can see you're in a hurry to get somewhere," Minkowski said to Marta's dog Goethe who was straining against his leash, spurred on by the continuous presence of an especially passive squirrel. Abe Minkowski had seemed to have made his point. He didn't want to tarry with the pair any longer than necessary. He didn't want to have his mental composition called into question any further than it usually was during such impromptu meetings when he would stop strangers and start to engage.

Maybe the cold had gotten to him finally and he was willing to give those he considered to be his flock a pass for the time being. He wasn't a real prophet after all, so much as an ironized version of one. Moreover, the quality of his conversation had grown threadbare of late. He was sick of his own jeremiads. He didn't believe in the solemnity of his prophecy anymore. He would just assume put a shirt back on and let the sinners sin. But God (or whatever madness had represented itself to him as God) drove him out here daily. He was a puppet in its hands. He had no choice but to soldier on until death.

When Goethe licked Abe Minkowski's bare ankle momentarily, he temporarily forgot his testimony.

"You and she are a unique pair," he told Marta, misidentifying the dog's gender. Then he began the long slog back to his bus stop. Along the way he would reclaim his shirt that he had ditched in the bushes somewhere for dramatic effect. He had a wool hat that he had stuck in one of the shirtsleeves that hopefully would be there for him when he tried to retrieve it. Today's chilly air was heavy with moisture. It penetrated into the body insistently. If he had to do it all over again he would have set up in the subway as he sometimes had when the weather was particularly spiteful. There, he would let the Angry God he served do with him as He might. He was after all a prophet without honor. Which to him meant his prophecy was shot through with qualification and regret.

He would do the best he could up until the point that his health was endangered. Didn't give a damn deep down about his prophecy. He was just a comedian. He needed people to get this through their thick skulls before they grew confrontational with him. He meant no disrespect really to the dead of 9/11. He wasn't out here by himself really to make a facile political point.

It was only when they had parted completely and Goethe had calmed down from his squirrel-chasing high that Marta Trask heeded Abe Minkowski's advice to cast her eyes southward.

"When it happened," Marta told Goethe advancing several blocks farther southward than they were otherwise used to on their walks, "I rushed straight home

to see to you. Of course, you were fine way up in the Upper West Side. But I rushed straight home anyway. My work building was downtown and you saw the dust on my sweater from the pulverized buildings. I saw you sniff around me for hours on end and wonder what was wrong. I couldn't talk to you about anything back then," Marta recalled. "You were nervous and didn't sleep. You knew something was wrong."

Here in this part of Central Park, trails seemed to wind back across each other as if strands of loose spaghetti tossed on the kitchen by a toddler.

Marta said to Goethe, "By September 12th of that year New York wasn't so safe for us anymore. So I put the down payment on the Hudson River cottage. You and I can go there whenever we want," she said, "though we've never been there together. Last year I drove there and loaded up on supplies for us. I bought a gun for us and hid it in one of the boxes. I don't have any bullets for it now. I bought a manual on how to use it and clean it and promised myself that one day I would take a course."

She closed her eyes and imagined herself waving the pistol around. When she tried to imagine herself aiming the gun and pulling the trigger the vision shriveled up into nothing like a leech when doused with salt. It was impossible for her to even fantasize about committing murder. Which likely meant that it was impossible for her in real life. But the gun, a Smith and Wesson .38, was in her possession now and it would stay in her possession forever. She had no plans for it beyond its maintenance and care. She felt that she needed it somehow. She felt that a gun was an item every responsible American needed to possess. This was regardless of if they actually had the guts to use it.

There were gun locks that she could use to make the gun safer for her to possess. This would allow her to keep the gun in an accessible place in her apartment.

"I'd never live here without it," Marta told Goethe. She sought out the firearms of the pair of NYC cops just in front of her to see if they had gun locks on their weapons. Holstered as the guns were, however, it was impossible for her to tell. But to judge by their body

language she doubted that they do. They each seemed too aware of their weapons at the moment to have them be neutered in this way. Their guns were a part of them really, inseparable from their authority that they seemed at pains to try and project. They didn't, for example, yield the way to any approaching jogger. Rather they stood shuffling in the path's center. They stared impassively at whoever was approaching through one-way lenses as if predators from another planet. They seemed intent on confronting any pedestrian who should happen to, if only because of insufficient deference paid to them, brush them on the way by. They weren't exactly walking briskly when Marta saw them. Merely they were shuffling back and forth as if their feet had gone to sleep. They seemed to have an errand in the park that circumstances were keeping them from fulfilling. If they lacked uniforms and badges their attitude would have struck an observer as entirely in keeping with the louche adolescent thugs that had long since been chased from the park's environs (at least during daylight hours). They seemed spoiling for trouble despite their official status. They seemed almost ready to stick out their legs and trip the next person who strolled too near to them. Then demand an apology for scuffling the tops of their shoes.

Likely, the cops' guns were not only devoid of safety locks but were also likely sitting in the holsters with their safeties off. Tomorrow or the next day Marta would inquire about these cops at the local police station. She wanted to see exactly what their mission was. The names on their badges were momentarily obscured from her view so she would have to walk close enough to them and on the right side to look. She didn't want to be their first tripping victim. So, she would have to take a circuitous route over there. She would walk past them then turn around. She would glare at their badges discreetly as possible so that she could get their names, commit them to memory, then walk away quickly.

She found both cops surpassingly strange. She was frustrated that after making two circuits around them with Goethe she discovered that these cops bore no outward identification at all.

“They’re not that kind of law enforcers,” a man on the park bench in a Homburg told Marta when on the third pass he deduced what information she was digging for from them. “Nowadays,” he said to her, “there’s a new branch of the police force. I don’t know what they call themselves,” he said. “I don’t know if they even have an outward facing name but they’re there. You see them all the time patrolling public places. And sometimes you see them with automatic rifles strapped around their shoulders.”

Not speaking above a half whisper to avoid the officers’ gaze, nevertheless, the unidentified man seemed serious as he might about what he was claiming.

“They are not to be trifled with,” he said to Marta Trask and waved her over to him nervously. Apparently one of the nameless officers had turned towards her. He was inspecting her through his one-way Ray Bans. This was prefatory to asking after her purpose in Central Park.

The man was a lawyer named Don Roberts. He told Marta and her little dog both that he had seen such things with his own eyes. He said that these nameless police force would occasionally stop passersby and ask after their proof of citizenship. Here was a profound violation of civil liberties. But then again civili liberties were passe. There was something called the Patriot Act that the Bush administration was in the midst of ramming through an utterly cowed Congress that might well inviolate the Bill of Rights completely, Don thought. There was talk of a secret prison established on the remote outpost of Guantanamo Bay in Cuba where various American dissidents would be airlifted when they had proved too bothersome to be left alone.

The problem of present-day New York post 9/11 Don, who was a former civil rights lawyer and present corporate attorney, said to Marta was that it had lost, temporarily hopefully, the ability to discern what sort of society it wanted to be a part of. Mayor Giuliani was a thug before the attacks as after. But the average New Yorker after the attacks had simply lost the ability to resist. They wanted to be safe from harm. So they were willing to forfeit their freedom to some small degree. They didn’t realize that once freedom was handed over it

was seldom returned. It might be five hundred years before New York and therefore America returned to normal. It had all happened so quickly according to Don that most New Yorkers weren't yet aware of its presence. The instantiation of fascism or a semi-fascism generally occurred like the falling of overnight snow. It's silent and mostly undetectable and could, once one was finally made aware of it, be seen as a type of comforting presence, a beautiful glaze upon the mundane or ugly. And just like snow, according to the lawyer, there was little a mere individual or even an entire social group could do to stop it. It's a physical manifestation, blind to itself and even those who exploit its presence. It's easy to ignore for those who were willing to live in an entirely insular way. At least initially it was easy to ignore. But eventually it infiltrated every nook and cranny. It homogenized the local landscape to a point that one forgot what was under its obliterating blanket. The destructiveness proceeded in stages over decades. And nobody later would think to blame the disaster on mere human weakness when so many impersonal forces could be blamed.

Don Roberts thought if Marta was smart, she would get the hell out of New York before they closed the escape routes for good.

"Once you're free of it, the social nightmare," he said to her with surprising emphasis, "You'll know exactly what to do. It makes you stupid, authoritarianism," he said to her. "Once you're free of its influence you'll see exactly where to go and what you should do."

Fortunately for them the two nameless cops had moved further down the path. They were requesting of a gentleman in a black coat with a heavy black beard that he kneel in front of them. For some reason this action was inexplicable to Marta. One of the cops seemed on the point of reaching for his gun. He was out of patience with what he saw as the man's defiance.

Look, Don Roberts said, and pointed out the quickest way out of the park on Marta's request. America, the world's eternal adolescent, had entered into a period of dark introspection that may or may not have ended with an attempted suicide. It was all very dramatic and

predictable. The key for the individual in modern America was merely to survive. There was no need to martyr oneself to a cause no one believed in any longer. In moder America no one was capable of serious belief. There was no reason to act enlightened when a person was scared shitless about where this was all headed and what should be done about it:

Free America From Its Holy Visions!

This was a graffito spraypainted on the inside of a tunnel that Marta had been directed to walk through on her way (hopefully) home. But the writing wasn't long for this world. Already it had been marked with a geo-locater by NYC's suddenly hyper-vigilant sanitation department. By tomorrow or the day after it would be either painted over or entirely erased by one of Giuliani's goons. The astringent chemicals that the department had taken to hording in two-hundred-gallon drums were stored in its ten-acre Queens warehouse just off the L.I.E. Cleanliness and freedom of expression were entirely opposite values apparently. Nobody knew this was the case until it was too late to do anything about it. Look, it was hard to feel sorry about an empire bent on self-harm. With America's downfall other nations would invariably gain. They would over time grow to empire-sized proportions. Thus, a tragedy would repeat as farce. No wise man knew his way out of the dilemma. Few knew of the dilemma at all.

The one caveat Don Roberts had mentioned to Marta before she set out for home with Goethe was not to talk to anybody on her way out of the park.

"If you do it'll be the end of you," he had told her and then fumbled in his jacket pocket for his business card. He seemed to have a need for a further relationship with Marta. He didn't say why yet as if it wasn't entirely clear yet even to himself. He wanted to take care of her. Or at least see to it that no harm came to her. He felt that Marta was in a not inconsiderable amount of danger. He felt the need to see her home safely even though physically escorting her would have been too much

trouble for him. It might be said that the lawyer had conflicted feelings about Marta. He didn't know what to think about her and then for how long.

Don Roberts was a native New Yorker lived with his own dog (who he had not bothered to name) in what might be considered a luxury apartment building ten blocks from here. His apartment overlooked Central Park West. If you asked him how he would have come to have been sitting here on this very bench in a place in the park where he seldom ventured into he wouldn't have had an answer for you. He just felt like a stroll apparently. Which was deeply off by itself. If you knew Don, you would be able to ascertain just how off. He didn't seem entirely self-composed now. He couldn't provide himself with an answer about why this was the case.

He had a cellphone in his lapel pocket that was not his but was given to him by a former client of his as a gift on the condition that he always answer it no matter how indisposed he was.

"I'm not sure I'm the one that you want," Don Roberts spoke into the phone. this was ten minutes after Marta had disappeared down the winding path. In fact, his phone had been ringing incessantly since she had departed but he hadn't picked up. He didn't feel any conversation presently would prove especially beneficial to him. He didn't feel the need to slit his own throat simply because he had made an ancillary promise to somebody else to do so.

On the other side of the conversation through an electronic miasma generated by a still un-robust cell phone network, the investigative journalist Rob George was asking Don Roberts after the possibility of dictating a living will by phone.

"We can do anything you want in this regard," Don said to him. "But it's not going to be legally binding until it's typed up and you sign it."

After a few seconds pause, Rob asked Don Roberts who he was with at the moment.

"Nobody," Don told him. "They're all strangers to me out here. I'm sitting alone on a park bench just like I told you I would be just now."

Rather than hang up, Rob George wanted to know how the weather was in New York.

“In a lifetime full of inane conversations,” Don Roberts said, “this is one that will stand out the most to me.”

Seconds later Don tossed the phone in a local trash bin.

“Why would you do such a thing?” his wife wanted to know twenty minutes later when he came to the apartment empty handed.

“Are asking me,” he said, “why did I hang up on him originally? Or why later on did I throw the phone away?”

“It’s part of the same pathology with you,” she said. “So, I assumed there’s only one answer to the same question.”

Quite true that. All through the night Don was struggling to form an answer. Just like America he needed to be free of his own holy vision. For hours on end, it went on like this. Finally, around three am he went to bed.

Swaddled in Darkness (January 1957)

I.

A housefly, black with green compound eyes, was moving around inside Experiment Room #1. Simulating (in Dr. Sidney Gottschalk's limited understanding of alien spacecraft's behaviors) the fractious vectors of flying saucers while traversing a rural airspace.

"I have for the most part ascertained at least six incidences of alien contact," Sidney said to Vyachaslav "Bill" Botev, an exterminator who had been brought in to deal with the fly.

According to Dr. Gottschalk, the most noteworthy of these incidents took place in the village of Roswell, New Mexico in 1947. Wherein an flying saucer had crashed into the desert just outside of town.

"There was physical evidence in the form of the alien corpses," Sidney said to Bill who had lately gone to his knees while trying to unpack his exterminator's case. "More relevantly," he said to Bill, "were the newspaper reports documenting much the same thing with various photographs. I have the clippings in my desk drawer for corroboration," he said. "Witnesses generally don't coordinate their stories in advance. Those who testify do so spontaneously," he said, "as if they lacked guile to lie."

The Roswell incident was an instance of human-alien contact, Sidney Gottschalk believed. It was initiated by aliens for the purpose of laying the groundwork for more profound human-alien communication later.

"It's entirely self-evident to me that they crashed while attempting a soft landing," he said to Botev while

watching Bill fish out a black fly swatter from his kit. The swatter seemed designed to pulverize the enormous airborne insects of the Amazon basin rather than a common American housefly.

“The fact that there is evidence of their demise signifies that they had made the decision to reveal themselves,” Sidney said. “There is nothing spontaneous in their decision-making,” he said. “Nothing to indicate that they are capable of spontaneity. To judge by their actions, I believe they’re more machine then animal. They proceed rigorously, entirely absent of the ability to improvise. They’re our betters, of course,” he said. “Because in our decision making, we are far more like baboons than machines.”

He thought at some level that he was the person to whom the aliens’ outreach was directed.

Maybe (but not likely) Sidney Gottschalk was an alien too. So many things would have made sense if this was the case. He was the extraterrestrials’ earthbound progeny waiting to be called home. He didn’t think this was merely just within the realm of possibility. He felt himself to be of another species altogether when in the company of most men. He was waiting for the great hour of contact to come when verification of this status would be provided for him. He was waiting for his call. He had his bags packed. This waiting was the sum of his inner life. He was usually outwardly directed. He didn’t have what amounted to a soul.

“Upon entering the flying saucer’s innards, the human traveler’s eye will flirt from spot to spot in search of something familiar such as a window curtain to provide a sense of comfort in otherwise alien circumstances,” he said to Bill Botev. “But he will find nothing of the sort to provide him with such comfort. Steel walls the color of meat in mid-rot will greet the traveler upon rising each morning,” Sidney said. “We can assume that any advanced race will have evolved out of the need for elaborate interior design. It is a feminine craft utterly, interior design,” he said. “It is something advanced intellects wouldn’t linger upon at all.”

According to Dr. Gottschalk, this inference was axiomatic. A mind once it was keenly enough developed

to master the rigors of a voyage to another star system wouldn't care, for example, if the bedspread matched the bed sheets underneath. Consciousness should have whittled itself down to a few central algorithms by that point. From there the mind would turn entirely to problem-solving. All forms of decoration would prove entirely unnecessary for such men. The aliens would have abandoned decoration voluntarily long before it was removed from their homes.

Sidney thought that eventually men would mimic machines and vice-versa. In his opinion, this would be a cause both for celebration and distress. Sidney himself, Sidney believed, was now a simple mathematical presence housed inside a sack of flesh. He claimed no subjective feelings about the world whatsoever. When pressed to, he could give his opinion about a particular shade of office carpeting or the sexual desirability of one of the CIA secretaries that were rotated in and out of here semi-regularly as a security measure. But without being prompted to fake it for social effect he believed himself entirely devoid of interiority. He saw himself as the first of a new breed, a superhuman presence waiting to be admired. He wasn't especially boastful about this heightened state even as he cultivated its capabilities. Merely he silently rejoiced in his own transcendent nature, appending various phrases onto its surface to describe it. He resolved never to mention his triumph over the subjective to anybody who did not ask him about it first.

He knew the trouble other human beings could cause a special person like him. Sidney Gottschalk was not a popular lad. Not at Harvard certainly nor at the boarding school in Connecticut he had been sent to after his mother was relieved of the burden of taking care of him. His peers alternately bullied him and gave him the cold shoulder. He knew he was better than them, smarter than them, more evolved than them but he didn't say anything about it to them. They wouldn't know if he was making it all up to pump his own sense of self-worth. He knew the violence of which mere proles were capable once it was pointed out to them how ordinary they were in comparison to a true man-machine hybrid. At Harvard

he took his meals alone. He had given up entirely on making any friends. For their part, his classmates barely recalled his name.

He didn't want to unduly upset those that he cared so little about. But, nevertheless, a man in his position with so much important work given to him could only be so deferential towards the rabblement and be an effective administrator.

"Ignore please, the woman in the corner," Dr Gottschalk told Bill Botev who finally seemed ready with his equipment. As he spoke Sidney pointed to a place in the room Bill had no intention of venturing into. This was behind the red curtain in the southeast corner. He assumed the red curtain was placed there because what was beyond there was off limits. But until Sidney had pointed her out, Bill hadn't been aware that there was anybody there. Why would she be hiding herself from a lowly exterminator? What did she have to fear from him?

The room was a hundred feet by a hundred feet but filled with enough furniture and equipment to make it seem slightly less spacious than its diameters suggested.

"If the fly goes back there," Bill said to Sidney, not bothering to make eye contact with him, "I'll sit outside and wait for it to come out."

Indeed, the whirling sixteen-millimeter camera poked inside the red curtain's opening suggested that something entirely compelling was taking place just beyond it. Pictures needed to be taken. And the filming could not be stopped until Bill Botev finished his work

"If you were to whack her on the snout with that truncheon of yours," Gottschalk said to Bill pointing to the industrial-grade swatter. "She wouldn't be aware that it happened. She wouldn't be aware if her nose was broken because of the blow you struck," he said to Bill Botev. "If the fly found a home and started laying eggs in her eye," he said, "given her present state, she would have to be told to blink to remove them. Given her present state she might actually protest that they had to be removed at all. As they and their miraculous biology were evidence of God's Grace on this planet. Or something to that effect. To destroy them would be a sin. The woman behind the curtain I'm talking about and her

storehouse of sentimentalities. I can't for the life of me remember her name even though we must technically record such data for purposes of following up. If it were up to me, I'd identify them all as numbers. I don't think there is a serious need to follow up with them," Sidney said, "given the project's parameters. In all candor, I don't think either they or their immediate family would be especially grateful if they saw us coming around again after what we did to them on the first go around. Due to the non-consensual nature of the experiments, there's a certain unpleasantness associated with their participation. Of course, there's nothing they could do to us legally. But I think we'd be pushing our luck trying to come back to them for a second dose after they've been released."

A second dose?

The woman's name Sidney recalled after consulting the existing paperwork lying on his desk blotter was Matilda Gertz, a secretarial pool typist and native of Roanoke, Virginia.

"Every morning, she would walk to the floor kitchen for a cup of coffee, pour her coffee, then leave the cup on the counter briefly as she sought out the bottle of cream in the ice box," Sidney told Bill Botev who was pretending not to listen. "So, one day we had a man trail behind her with an eye dropper. Beforehand we made sure to put the cream in the icebox's back behind a birthday cake. So she'd linger in there while looking for it and not see what was happening behind her."

The cigarette Sidney Gottschalk was in the midst of smoking was of the new mentholated variety that supposedly gave a boost to the smoker's mental acuity as well as leaving a refreshing taste in the smoker's mouth for an hour afterwards.

"We are scientists of the highest caliber," he told Bill Botev in between puffs. To him this meant that they did things with a specific purpose in mind. Despite appearances to the contrary, these scientists weren't mere sadists who enjoyed toying with the local populous towards no real end. At the present stage in this set of experiments that as of last year had come to be classified as Project MKULTRA, a significant amount of

the subjects' participation needed to be non-consensual. If only because the techniques and drugs that were being developed in this lab would be administered in a non-consensual manner. The CIA had in mind to develop a truth serum to ply secrets from various Soviet operatives and their intra-departmental moles. Josiah Dorset, Sidney's sponsor in the CIA, was especially interested in the counterintelligence usefulness of mind control. Once a mole was uncovered, his plan was to leave him or her in place and feed him or her false intelligence. Eventually the mole could be coerced to turning in their Soviet handlers. At which point the CIA's counterintelligence effort would be considered a success.

Josiah Dorset was yet unaware of how deep the infiltration ran. He had an ever-growing list of subjects within the CIA and without. Ethel Merman, for example, was suspected of being KGB by Dorset. Last year he had made an underling forswear the wearing of dental crowns to head off the planting of listening devices in the Langley office. In truth he didn't know how deep the infiltration ran. He assumed one mole would lead to the next. He assumed it would all unfold in an organic way.

Sidney Gottschalk believed that that the quest for a universal truth serum was a fool's errand.

"The brain is not a computer nor is memory a punch card," was his stock line when arguing against the project's objective. He believed human memory worthless for the CIA's goals as so much of it was arbitrarily created and sloppily maintained. He didn't believe humans recorded truths with their minds so much as half-truths infected with suppositions. His bosses including Josiah believed the mind was the key to winning the Cold War. But Sidney believed the mind was a mere impediment to a larger understanding. Truth serums were generally no good on ordinary humans he felt because like it or not the truth was—as ordinary people generally understood it—so shot through with subjective perception, ideology, and distortion as to be inseparable from a person's prejudices. Members of his own project were not immune from such distortions.

"They want Communist infiltration to be present, so they imagine that it is," was how he put it to Bill Botev

when talking about such matters in an alarmingly (given the circumstances) open manner. Even though he was a team member in good standing on MKULTRA, Gottschalk's associates were always referred to as either "they" or "them" by him. He was at a social distance to all other human beings regardless of what his credentials indicated. Such distancing was deeply useful to him because it allowed him to analyze his colleagues' motives with a greater level of acuity than would have been possible otherwise. It was the source really of his considerable brilliance, the ability to deal himself out of the human drama entirely. He saw human affairs so clearly because he had no real emotional stake in their outcome. He didn't care who won or the lost the Cold War, for example. He suspected or hoped that when its endgame started, he would be in another star system, carried away by his alien parents.

"The people we intend to use it on, this drug," he said, "are usually steeped in hardcore Communist ideology before we get our hands on them," Sidney said to Bill Botev. "They're brainwashed into believing what their handlers prefer that they believe, and they abandon the rest. They don't know the truth in any meaningful sense so it can't be plied from them. It's no different than any average American citizen. At the most what can be gleaned from any of these subjects is an admission of certain facts. But facts by themselves usually don't tell a vivid enough story to constitute what my employers continuously term *actionable intelligence*, "Sidney said. "This is all the average man on the street may be assumed to know, a series of disjointed facts pickled in various ideologies. They could not for the life of them analyze why, for example, they were ever assigned to perform a given operation by a given operative. They always would assume it was part of a master plan of which they were not privy to. They never asked, they never thought to ask, so they were not told. But we always assume for the sake of our own invented plots that our enemies are far more intelligent than they really are. We assume them as supermen when they are exactly like us. There's no difference between them and us in the final accounting. Maybe the only real edge we

have on them is me and those few like me. At least I can tell the truth. But telling the truth and having another listen to the truth are two distinct events. It's not as if a man of great courage and wisdom can do anything on his own. The smartest of truthtellers know when to tone it down. And the CIA never had a need for somebody who knew the big picture as well as he knew the back of his right hand."

Sidney Gottschalk thought the reason for this was that nobody in the company and with project MKULTRA especially had the ability to reason his way out of a paper bag.

"They're addicted to spy stories," he told Bill Botev of his co-workers. "Vertiginous pulp fictions. They believe themselves heroes in their own struggle to preserve freedom at any cost. They're tweedy chaps yet, nevertheless, graced with an indomitability. Agamemnons in argyle so to speak. To a man they are not capable of basic self-reflection."

He also thought that once they had progressed to a certain level of extra-legal activity, these suspender-clad warriors would be compelled to carry on with their experiments as a matter of basic political survival. They couldn't simply declare the project a failure after the physical and psychical abuse they would come to heap upon wholly innocent people. At the very least they would need to justify their gross abuse of human rights with the flowering of a useful technology. Or else they would eventually be the ones to be led behind that red curtain during a semi-daze to encounter who knew what demons existing on the other side. They realized probably too late that they were out on a ledge. A fascist takeover could occur in America. At which point they would be safe. But anything short of that wherein the Bill of Rights was still being adhered to relatively faithfully they might all ultimately find themselves up on charges. For the Agamemnons in argyle, such an ordeal would prove the soul of outrage. Monuments should be built in their honor. But to the ordinary jerk on the street, they would seem corrupt and out of their minds.

The whirring of the sixteen-millimeter camera was temporarily obscuring Matilda Gertz' stream of

consciousness palaver. It was rendered in a low guttural moan as if she was perpetually in the midst of waking up.

“If she gets up and bothers you,” Dr. Gottschalk told Bill Botev from the other side of his desk that he had moved to after his cigarette was smoked, “please be kind enough escort her back to her chair. She has water to drink underneath the desk if she get thirsty. If she asks for your name, it would be wise of you not to give it. There’s no accounting for the span of memory of any particular subject and it’s best if you have as little to do with this project as possible. For legal reasons I’m telling you this. I’m telling you it’s best to be as non-descript as possible in dealing with those who are here against their will.

The reason Bill Botev had been summoned at all, Sidney went on to say, for such a relatively small matter as a single fly, was that Sidney wanted to keep this room as pristine as possible in dealing with non-consensual subjects under the influence of experimental psychotropic substances.

“We don’t want to be accused later on of what we freely admit to presently,” he told Bill Botev who had already swung and missed once with the giant swatter and was in the midst of relocating the insect afresh. “More than this, however,” Sidney said, “Is the room needs to be like the inside of a spaceship. It’s a *sine qua non.* For scientific reasons, I’m saying. I’m not going on a journey anytime soon. But they are. Well in a sense they are. Because this is the way they invariably describe it when they come out of it. I’ve painted the walls silver, so they’re disoriented enough not to realize where they are. Nothing for the eye to catch on to create a recollection for future reference. It’s my idea, all mine,” Sidney Gottschalk said to Botev. “It’s something that they didn’t ever try to talk me out of as I told him how important it was to me.”

From out of his desk drawer Sidney Gottschalk removed a surgical mask. Its usefulness in this situation to Botev was presently unknown. The DDT he would eventually spray into the room’s corners to forestall a fly invasion was, as everybody knew, harmless to humans.

Maybe Bill was meant to put the mask on as a guarantor of his anonymity. Minutes after its reveal it was obvious that there wasn't going to be any answer forthcoming from Sidney about what one was supposed to do with it. It was a Zen koan, rather. Its intention was to facilitate contemplation as opposed to physical safety. Well, maybe this too finally was incorrect. Even after ten minutes of being in his presence Bill Botev sensed the contempt somebody like Sidney Gottschalk would have for the precepts of Eastern thought. He didn't seem to be in possession of a single spiritual iota, or at least pretended that he wasn't. He had never asked himself, for instance, why the universe presented itself as one way and not some other way. He had never questioned reality. He never peered inside its meager clockwork to glean a relationship between individual gears.

The mask was one of several dozen that had found its way into Sidney Gottschalk's desk over the three years he had been working in the CIA sub-department called Technical Services Sector, directing project MKULTRA from an ironic distance.

"You can never go wrong with one of these," Sidney said to Bill of the surgical mask when on the fourth glance in his direction basic social protocol dictated that an answer be provided. Sidney had lit another mentholated cigarette in the interim and the answer made its way past the pale blue cloud of exhalation that at the close of 1955 was ubiquitous in every public space in the world.

His point to Bill Botev was that a mask could reveal as well as conceal. There was a certain truth that was expressed by the wearer whenever it was donned. Sidney Gottschalk had three dozen different masks at home, he said, that he kept in a padlocked wardrobe in his basement. Some of these masks were absurd and facetious. These included his Hawkman hawk nose appendage which he had not worn since relocating to the DC area from Alabama in the winter of 1950. Some, like the surgical mask, seemed to hold some small measure of utilitarian value, albeit ambiguously.

One mask was entirely arresting. This was the veil cut from a white sheet that he had procured for himself

while down in Tuskegee. He had no intention of destroying it anytime soon (even though propriety dictated that he should). This mask he had decided some time ago was the jewel of his collection. When the extra-terrestrials came to reclaim him from this earthly purgatory this mask would be the face he presented to them. He saw it as part of him even though it was entirely enigmatic, even to him. It somehow communicated something or even everything deep and terrifying that he had learned about the world. He considered it his most cherished object. He had started his mask collection in the 1930s in order to procure an object exactly like it. He considered it his life's work.

Within a minute, never having alternately made a move toward it or away from it, Bill Botev was able to ascertain that the mask's presence was a mere provocation. As it was instigated for no apparent reason, he would soon forget about it entirely.

"The reason we chose you for this mission," Sidney Gottschalk had told him after Bill had first arrived from the building's briefing room, "is that we have been assured that your patriotism is entirely above reproach."

On the contrary. Long before the fly's interposition into his silver-covered experimentation room, Sidney had discovered Bill Botev's name on a list of potential DC-area subversives gathered by the House un-American Activities Committee. The fly had been mere pretext. It had been allowed to traverse the premises on its own recognizance after Sidney had kindly let it into the building and guided it along with a nectar of aged meat and curdled milk until it entered the room. Genuinely upset about the fly's presence he nevertheless, if pressed, would have to admit to his own culpability regarding its status as a distractor from pure scientific rigor. In a sense he was conducting two experiments at once and one was interfering with the other. Bill Botev was the key to this dissonance's resolution. Gottschalk saw him as a potential candidate for non-consensual psychotropic drug testing but that was in the future. Presently he needed to make sure that not only the drugs were effective but also the field conditions in which the drugs would be administered were well-

documented. Agents needed to know how to react. More precisely, they needed to be told how to react because of what they saw happening to their subjects. As with everything within Sidney's orbit, a protocol would have to be developed for them to master. There was no spontaneity involved in human affairs as far as he could see. Everything human was quantifiable, therefore, controllable. Even acid trips would be seen as banal eventually. There was no mystery to them and none to their bizarre effects as far as he was concerned. It was simply a matter of cracking the psychopharmacological code. It was simply a matter of figuring out what a given subject was experiencing. It was an eminently solvable puzzle. This part of the project he didn't see as any sort of challenge.

When he left Bill Botev alone in the room with Matilda Gertz it was with the instruction that he should aid her only if she asked for aid.

"There is no small degree of methodology involved here," he said to Bill and made it clear that he would not be back for a while. What Bill should do when he was done was pack up quietly and drop his invoice off at the receptionist out front. If Bill wanted, he could smoke. But he should make sure the ash was captured and not deposited on the floor. It was common courtesy after all to do so at least in Sidney's reckoning. He didn't see himself as being overly demanding in this regard. He was a scientist through and through. He thought it was the least Bill Botev could do for him, after being out of work for the past few months. Botev who had been affiliated with the Communist party at one time in his life needed a friend like Sidney Gottschalk given the new political order. Further on in their relationship Sid would make this clear to Bill in starker terms. But, for now, he would leave him with the instructions that he should remove the ash from Experiment Room #1 if he expected to be paid in full.

The sixteen-millimeter camera that was *hidden* in the room and covered in insulating material so that it was muted below twenty decibels. It was recording Bill Botev's initially graceless efforts to swat the fly out of existence. This was twenty seconds after Sidney

Gottschalk's departure, just after he had turned the camera on by use of a remote switch.

There was enough film in the camera for a forty-minute exposure. After which it sent a signal down the hall that it was out of film and was requiring replenishment if the filming was to continue.

Maybe on the tenth attempt at swatting, Bill contacted the fly. That was that as far as this creature of God was concerned. It was a black protein paste at that point. Never one to be accused of being squeamish, Bill Botev used his bare fingers to pick up the fly's remains and deposit it in his jumpsuit's lone pocket as a type of impromptu burial.

"You're right here with me now," Bill told Matilda Gertz when through the curtain the question of where she was uttered in a sleepy voice. In Matilda's field of vision there were shimmering blue fish equipped with human mouths swimming around her. These creatures argued against the conceit that she was "right here." She was rather in no place and every place at once. Beyond such visions she believed that reality had been broken irrevocably.

Somebody not on acid was always gifted with a definite sense of what reality was. That sense went missing as soon as one began to trip. What the ingestion of LSD-25 did to the mind was to cause it to lose the inherent sense of being familiar with one's surroundings. Under its influence even ordinary objects would be cause for slack-jawed wonderment. One could look at a black telephone on a desk for instance for hours on end seeing something protean-organic in its shape as if it was alive but merely temporarily frozen in its present state. The black telephone would be caressed at first then later viewed with supreme suspicion as it seemed, if only to judge by its reticence, that it was listening into non-telephonic conversations. Eventually the hallucinator would reconcile the fear he felt towards the telephone with the love he experienced with the remainder of the universe. A user would admit shame at not treating the telephone as a long lost relative of the sort he was entirely overjoyed to see. And the strange thing was the sentiment persisted if only slightly when the acid

dissipated between brain synapses. It left a permanent mark, in other words. As if its revelations were in some way validation of a heretofore rejected worldview. A hallucinator was always left with the impression that deep down this was the way the world actually was. A man dropped acid not to forget the truth of his perceptions so much as to recall them for the first time. But in 1955 such profundity was entirely missing from those few CIA-sponsored scientists who contemplated LSD-25's effects. If only because they were adamant that they would not be exposed to it. They tended to group the drug in with all other intoxicants that they tested under the MKULTRA's diffuse rubric. This included heroin and various sleep-inducing hypnotics. There was nothing much philosophically interesting for them let alone spiritually profound in the universe according to them regarding the trips their subjects took in front of the cameras, mostly unwittingly. They were as a group immune to the charms both of philosophy and spirituality. Many of them considered themselves believers but this was due largely to the social conditioning of the Eisenhower-era. When they closed and thought of God, they tended to imagine an enormous computer-controlled machine. This God was to be feared if only because of its computational might. There was no real reasoning with its central algorithm. The algorithm for the most part was blind to its own presence. For an elevated perspective this was a God unworthy of human praise in any regard.

What you needed to do to talk somebody down from a bad trip was simply repeat his or her name and have him or her repeat their name constantly until it penetrated that they were the person they were before they swallowed whatever medium the dose was placed in. Presently such medical knowledge had yet to be divined, absent as it was of ten million or more extra-legal experiments with Dr. Hoffmann's magic drug and the distress it occasionally caused to the user. Well, if the like of Sidney Gottschalk actually knew about that technique, he wouldn't have employed it in this situation and for obvious reasons. The discomfort that many of the non-consensual subject were experiencing under the

drug's influence was argument for its continued use in the field. Those who were given acid and emerged from behind the red curtain in a blissed-out state of pie-eyed acceptance tended to be classified as negative results. It's simply that their testimony couldn't be trusted. They were absent of allegiances both to the USSR and the United States after that. Profoundly dangerous figures in a way. But at minimum they were of no use at all.

As regarded Matilda Gertz and her present state of troubled altered consciousness, Bill Botev felt compelled to take action.

"You needed to concentrate on where you are a moment," Bill said to Matilda on the other side of the curtain once having abandoned his canister of pressurized DDT that was the standard treatment of the day against all vermin. Not such a bad looking woman he decided, once his eyes had adjusted to the closed off space's uncertain light. His immediate line of thinking, however, wasn't pointing to romance. He had never seen anything like what Matilda was in the midst of at the moment. Even those who had fallen under the sway of the Holy Spirit in his father's itinerant church in the 1920s seemed in altogether better shape than Matilda just then. The spirits that had entered through her were chaotic and mercurial. They needed to be guided by her, which seemed overwhelmingly difficult for her at the moment. She seemed tranquilized but at the same time restless. As if in the midst of an especially vivid dream. It wasn't a matter of sobering her up (though Botev assumed that she was sober). Her main difficulty was that she seemed not to know where or even who she was. Images kept assaulting her and she was struggling to find their root cause. A vivid hallucination experienced while awake was especially disconcerting because there was no physical referent for it. The images from within and the images from without melded into a singular mass. At that point a certainness about reality vanished. A person on acid became aware of the brain as not simply another stimulus and response machine but was at a loss to explain what resided beyond its falsifications. The acid traveler started to consider the possibility of her former perceptions being false or merely conformant to

some biological necessity. As opposed to conformant with what was actually there.

Matilda Gertz didn't need to concentrate so much on intellectual matters as relax and ride the wave out until she could begin to reclaim whatever segment of reality that she wanted.

"I'm not feeling so well," she said to Bill Botev. Bill was kneeling by her side when Matilda, quickly and almost demurely, vomited onto the tiny plastic table in front of her. Hard to say if she knew Bill was there with her because there were signs that she was still lost. There were other people in the room with them, according to her. She kept refusing to perform the acts that these others were asking her to perform. She didn't understand what she had done to any of them to be put in this position. Constantly this was her refrain to them. She assumed quite logically that this was all a case of mistaken identity. She assumed that twenty or thirty seconds from now the paperwork would arrive exonerating her from the metaphysical prison she had been forced into. There was an incontestable degree of injustice to the suffering she was enduring presently. She wasn't high enough yet to not miss the old reality. She remembered it at some level and she felt it was where she most belonged. This new reality or realities was deeply alien to her. Its other-ness was what appalled her most.

She would likely need to vomit again. Once Bill realized this, he would execute a brief search for some receptacle to house her outflow. It seemed the decent thing to do with somebody in her state. Bill Botev was performing the act to preserve some semblance of decorum regarding his surroundings. He didn't feel the deep sense of patriotism that Dr. Gottschalk had alluded to when he suggested that it was his duty to just leave things be. He thought rather this entire scene abominable and likely criminal though he hadn't yet been given the particulars of Matilda Gertz' entry into the program. He assumed there needed to be protections in place for the subject, but he didn't see any existing yet. He thought her own drug-induced dementia had been left to play out by itself absent of any medical

supervision. The reason for this likely was that CIA didn't care about the experiment's outcome at least regarding the subjects' long-term well-being. This was obvious enough even though Gottschalk had indicated something to the contrary. Matilda had been left to either go crazy or choke on her tongue and drop dead of a heart attack because of whatever poison she had been given. The scientific value to this approach was nonexistent. There were no experimental controls, for starters. There was no attempt to reproduce field conditions where the drug might be administered. So, Bill was left with the conclusion that Dr. Sidney Gottschalk was a mere sadist. He wasn't an academic intent on contributing to the body of scientific knowledge regarding a certain drug's use and abuses. Rather, he seemed intent on breaking any number of human beings and conducting a post-mortem on them later like Bill had witnessed during his stint in the air force when so many test pilots that he catered to were subjected to so many unsafe circumstances that they started to seem like walking crash test dummies. Their nametags that he was in charge of minting were created as a type of ironic convention, he thought. As if they were fundamentally unaware of their own interchangeability.

The reason Bill was helping Matilda Gertz at all had everything to do with his commitment as a non-aligned socialist. This was as opposed to a chivalrous act or one that was engendered by non-ideological compassion.

"Just for a moment I forgot my mission here," Bill said later to a certain Mr. Joachim Hexall twenty minutes after departing from Matilda Gertz when encountering him there in an otherwise empty break room. The invoice he had written up for the CIA was still in his jumpsuit's breast pocket. He was trying his best to navigate the office building's twisting set of hallways and dead ends. So many of the entrances and exits were padlocked from the other side that it was impossible to know exactly where the right door was to walk through. Bill had been escorted into the building by Dr. Gottschalk. Presently he was unaware if it was possible that he could leave the premises on his own. He had assumed this lacuna was merely an oversight on Dr. Gottschalk's part. At some

point he assumed he would receive a page telling him to report to a certain set of building coordinates where his invoice would be recorded. He assumed this wasn't a further example of non-consensual experimentation. He didn't understand what Sidney Gottschalk specifically would have to gain by putting him through the ringer in that way.

Bill Botev thought Joachim Hexall had been fit to approach as his jumpsuit was the same color as Bill's.

Joachim's was sooty on the exterior which put him more in line with boiler maintenance and repair than in the rat killing trades like Bill. More to the point Bill had identified Joachim as CIA and this was reassuring. Joachim was in the middle of lunch break though it was three in the afternoon. Maybe he just goofing off which was all to the better as far as Botev saw it. Sweating slightly from his exertions back in Experiment Room #1, Bill nevertheless was trying to remain poised. His level of discomfort increased with every moment he remained in the CIA's Langley headquarters. He couldn't rationalize what exactly was happening to him. He felt vaguely compromised somehow as if every step he had made upon entering the office's confines was preordained by someone else. He was in a slight amount of trouble already and he didn't know why.

He needed the money. He had risen this morning and driven out to Virginia with the mere intention of doing the best job he could for his customer while still making it back to his neighborhood bar before closing time.

In the midst of helping Matilda Gertz, Botev had neglected to avoid the sixteen-millimeter camera's gaze focused on Matilda's slouching form.

"It was a strange situation from the word go," he said to Hexall. He admitted that the doctor had told him to speak to the subject only when in the CIA's presence. But Matilda Gertz' disoriented state meant that he must take proactive measures with her. Presently he was becoming aware that Dr. Gottschalk knew this was the case. Therefore, the injunction against him talking to her was preposterous. It was a provocation on Sidney's part. As if he felt there was some precious bit of scientific data

that would be corrupted as a result of him trying to help her.

The movie camera was a standard issue device (Panaflex Zoom) of 1940s vintage. At any moment it could be sabotaged roughly or simply removed from auto play by toggling the on button a second time.

“By the time I thought of doing something it was too late,” Bill told Joachim, whose fingers were entirely missing on one hand. There was only a fleshy hub there. This appeared far more distressing than if the entire hand was taken.

“I suppose,” he said, “I could see her wide-open eyes and the way her irises grew larger and smaller spontaneously as if they were pulsating lights. To me she was at the point of dropping dead. I thought to get her off the chair and lay her on the floor, but she was too energetic for that. She was experiencing fantasies or hallucinations or whatever you want to call it like she had drunk a quart of whiskey before breakfast. My old man was like that before going to prison for good,” Botev said. “He used to shadowbox flat on his back. And when you see that you realize somebody’s in trouble. It’s not her fault I don’t think. I don’t think she’s here because they’re paying her to be.”

What he did do upon seeing Matilda in that compromised state was to go one knee in front of the chair she was sitting on and ask her several times if she needed the doctor’s help.”

“I said the *doctor’s* help,” Bill Botev said to Joachim Hexall for the first time noticing the ridges on his fleshy hub. These were the now vestigial knuckles that the surgeon (if there had been a surgeon) had been remiss in removing. You could see the ridges flex under the skin from time to time like the just submerged heads of men in quicksand struggling for a belated breath. They needed to be removed. The entire hand needed to be cleaved off at the wrist then promptly incinerated. The hand was wretched beyond words to Botev. It was an affront to any idea of God that one cared to make up.

He didn’t understand precisely the disgust that Joachim’s deformity was causing in him, but he supposed it had something to do with his presently agitated state.

He felt violated in some ill-defined way by all that he had witnessed in the past twenty minutes. He felt somehow he was owed an apology by men who had never apologized for anything in their lives.

More than this he was irritated at having to be defensive about exercising common human decency toward another person.

“I made it a point not to go to her right away,” Botev said of his experience behind the red curtain. “I looked at her,” he said. “It’s all there on film,” he said. “I feel I’ve been trapped into something. I feel the doctor wanted me to go in there all along and look around. I feel they want to use what I did as a type of blackmail so that they can get away with something.”

When the workers finally controlled the means of production such larceny would vanish, thought Bill Botev. Well, maybe not. As, strictly speaking, a worker who controlled the means of production changed into a capitalist overnight. Nowadays Bill Botev mouthed the socialist clichés, recalled the glorious moments of 1917 when the world shook, answered politely but negatively in handwritten letters to his former CPUSA colleagues concerning his reluctance to volunteer, and tried as best he could to rationalize his former pro Soviet views with the news of the Stalinist terrors that were filtering in through European news agencies. The news of the extensiveness of the network of gulags in Siberia, for example, and the forced relocation of the kulaks in the Caucasus had been long since confirmed by those sources of information Botev tended to trust. Presently the old rationalizations about a dictatorship of the People and the hardship of nation building seemed to ring increasingly hollow in the face of so much objective cruelty. The last CPUSA meeting Botev attended was in 1948 where punches were thrown about the proposed denouncement of the Berlin Air Lift. From that point forward Botev had been content to let his membership lapse. He stopped answering correspondence from any party official as he had stopped taking their calls. It seemed far too self-deceptive an act at the point to believe in the formation of a worker’s paradise at least based on the Leninist Model. There needed to be a new

revolutionary model founded, he thought, with a far more humane (and thus likely modest) outlook. It needed to look like something much like the social democracies he had read about thriving on the Scandinavian peninsula presently. These were generous welfare states that nevertheless enabled upward mobility for those enterprising enough to do so. He thought it was the best that human planners could build given the warped material they had to build with. True communism would likely be reserved for the Kingdom of Heaven. Botev had come to see that only terror ensued when a heaven on earth was attempted. Too many imperfect angels were ready for the incinerator. Too many unenlightened souls existed. These would rather live on as human beings than as God-drunk seraphim while forced to shout the trisigomy until their throats bled and their lungs burst in their chests like so many overtaxed balloons.

The fate of Lavrentiy Beria was only made known to Bill Botev last week. This was because he strictly avoided the perusal of any Luce/Hearst owned media source. An American hungry for a truly alternative take on current events in the 1950s would have to demonstrate profound diligence and patience to do so. Ham radio was a man's best alternative in this case, but Bill didn't own a set. Nowadays and routinely even non-Soviet sponsored foreign magazines and newspapers were routinely intercepted at the docks by Mr. Hoover's FBI. There was no free press operating in America any longer as far as Botev was concerned. Its output was long since parsed and purified before making its way into the market. Its printed materials were fit only to wrap the daily catch in.

Beria, who upon Stalin's death had attempted to seize power for himself, was long since tried, convicted, and executed for a variety of crimes that likely would hold little credibility in the western understanding of jurisprudence. As understood by an impartial observer, his execution was hardly a cause for melancholic introspection, but Botev was greatly disturbed by its indifferent administration. To him, Beria was alive one day then full of holes courtesy of a firing squad the next. It belied the notion that humane treatment in the Soviet

Union was possible once the cult of Comrade Joe was finished. Stalin was dead for over six months before the creaky authoritarianism of the purges swung into action once more, this time to Beria's disfavor. Fuck him as he was human scum, a serial rapist and a child murderer. But for Botev it proved that the corruption of the Soviet state transcended Stalin's Cult of Personality. There was no reforming such a political culture where acts of common murder outlived a particular murderer. The blood was woven into the political fabric of Russia. Bill Botev understood that several of his former "comrades" were trying to sanitize the recent history of the USSR and its communist apparatus by downplaying, for example, the extensiveness of the Soviet gulag system. To him this was an entirely self-defeating attempt. To him becoming radicalized politically was synonymous with becoming aware of the true history of the world. Anybody with real empathy for the plight of the masses would recoil in horror at the crimes of Joseph Stalin. There was no reconciliation of Stalinism with the pure Marxist vision. So, years ago, Bill Botev was forced to abandon both more or less simultaneously. He was trying to reconcile his new life of relative bourgeois comfort with hoary Communist orthodoxy. Now he wanted to evolve society and not tear it apart. It was a familiar progression for radicals of his generation. He didn't believe in anything anymore except for his personal desire to be happy. Despite his moderate views he was very much politically engaged. He read left wing papers as much as they were made available to him in the States. He still didn't allow himself an unexpressed opinion about US foreign policy while not at work. As he lived in the DC area, many of his clients were government offices. Except for the strange apparition of Matilda Gertz, he didn't find this situation especially unusual. He hadn't given Dr. Sidney Gottschalk a second thought up until the point that he saw one aspect of his labors.

He assumed he could speak openly like this in front of Joachim Hexall because in so many ways he seemed to be cut from the same cloth.

“I have long since worn through my original copy,” Bill told Joachim seeing the newly minted paperback version of Eric Hoffer’s *The True Believer* placed under Hexall’s cafeteria tray. This was an important book, he told Joachim, if somewhat biased against Bolshevik revolution. From his perspective what was generally wrong with present day radical movements was encoded in *The True Believer*. The typical member of the CPUSA for example was a typical true believer in search of absolution from himself. He wasn’t as aware of dialectics as he ought to have been. He wasn’t directed toward the common good so much as the good of the local authority figure around which their potential cell was formed. He didn’t question authority for example at least to the extent that he could remain a real force for progressive change. He needed to be sophisticated regarding the propaganda being broadcast constantly within his cell and without. Presently, Bill was a mere true believer, a mere brick waiting to be thrown. He didn’t have much in the way of ideology, not anymore. According to Hoffer, he might as well have been a member of the John Birch Society as a comrade in arms. Devoid of real analysis undertaken on the part of its membership, every political movement’s mission statement was interchangeable with another’s. True believers were cannon fodder in waiting. Their usefulness was only made plain once the dream of a utopia had failed.

Bill thought it all self-evident. On the other hand, Joachim Hexall didn’t seem to understand.

Joachim’s exposure to the Communist Party of the United States, for example, consisted of what he read about in *Life* magazine. He didn’t have a real feeling for the party’s present needs, let alone the psychological makeup of its constituency. He hadn’t really given it much thought up until the moment that Botev had started in about it.

“Realize the building you are standing in before you make with all the high-flown gibberish,” Joachim told him. For the first time since he was in Bill’s presence, Joachim made eye contact with him.

“This is the place where socialist ideals swim upstream to die,” he said indicating the larger building

surrounding them. “They won’t have it within their walls hardly, I shouldn’t think,” Joachim Hexall said. “In Langley they hate collectivism like a Nazi hates a Jew. They likely have the cafeteria bugged even now in a search to root out subversives.”

Rather than a day laborer like Bill Botev, Joachim Hexall was in fact a recent recruit of the CIA. He had been dedicated to Sidney Gottschalk’s program almost since arriving.

According to Joachim, Botev had gotten off easy bearing witness to the experiment.

“It’s my belief,” he said to Bill, “that Dr. Gottschalk is using you as a dupe of some kind. Maybe not a dupe as it’s a bad word. Better: an unwitting mole whose main purpose is to attract fellow travelers. Or whatever it is you call yourselves amongst yourselves nowadays,” Hexall said. “I’ve heard so many terms for it around here in the past few months it’s hard to single out the correct word. *The Fellow Traveler*, *the Sympathizer*, *the Comrade*, *the Red*, *the Pinko*, *the Subversive*, *the Useful Idiot*. It doesn’t matter to me what it is you call yourselves. There’s a name for everything under the sun, isn’t there?” Joachim said. “Giving something a name doesn’t make it any more understandable. It simply takes away the fear of the unknown. With this in mind, perhaps the Communist Menace would have better left unnamed. If only for propaganda purposes.”

The hub of his mangled hand was always a source of fascination to Joachim Hexall. Sometimes he couldn’t help holding it up to his face in mid-conversation and stare at it as if it was sort of alien presence come down to earth to befuddle and amaze, to buttress the faith of the faithful and expedite the damnation of the damned, an object of wonder and disgust at the same time from which one’s gaze could not diverted if a thousand horses pulled one’s head in a different direction.

“I look at it sometime as not even part of me,” Joachim Hexall said as he had seen Botev become progressively transfixed by the stub’s lumpy hexagonal shape. He could flex the spindle that remained underneath the scar tissue that had formed around the shape’s sides, so it seemed it was some type of

enormous unicellular organism attempting to find an environment in which to propagate. Flexing two or three stubs at once made it appear that there was a secondary creature trapped under the surface of the skin attempting an escape. But it never seemed a part of him even slightly. The instant he looked at the stump was the instant he disassociated himself from it. It seemed primed for excision. He needed to find a surgeon who would perform the work.

He asked Bill Botev why he thought they would not take the entire hand and leave the hub in place.

“If they sliced me at the wrist,” he said to Bill, “there would have been a nice smooth surface there to place a hook in,” he said. “I could have walked out of the hospital with my self-respect intact knowing that they did the best they could with me. Presently,” he said, “I’m no better than a sideshow attraction. You look at me as nothing more than a deformity with a person clinging to it. It doesn’t hurt my feelings, I know that it’s true. I know that people are acting on their own impulses when they look at me. They can’t help themselves, just like you. I know that anything short of shaming them will not get them to stop. It’s something largely they couldn’t stop if they tried.”

For him, too, the stub was experienced as an alien presence. It had nothing to do with him personally. He told Botev he couldn’t even masturbate with it effectively.

Changing the subject only slightly he told Bill the term “fellow traveler” was intensely strange, ill-fitting, and awkward, akin to his half-formed hand dangling from his right arm.

“They brought me here to talk to you about your status,” Joachim Hexall said. “But I don’t really care if you want to reply to me or not.”

There was a little valley of skin that the cigarette fit into. It was pinched in place by the tiny nubs of the knuckles. Really once he put his smoke in place, he didn’t even know the difference. He lacked self-consciousness about his hand. He would have been surprised if anybody called any attention to it.

Probably Gottschalk's plan was to contact a sampling of Botev's lefty colleagues then slip them the mickey. The mickey being LSD-25. Presently he was content to experiment with those milling around the office. Like Matilda Gertz. His goal was to be able to plant suggestions in the deep unconscious so much so that the subjects were not even aware they were there. Dr. Gottschalk's usual line when rehashing this objective to his higher ups was that the best liars were those unaware that they were lying. They wanted robots to the extent that they could be turned on and off at will. But they also needed the robots to be capable of independent thought. The goal was to drill down into whatever substrata existed in the mind and plant what amounted to a secondary consciousness there. Once this was carried out the cold war would be all but won. Any number of Soviet apparatchiks could be turned against their masters irrevocably and without detection. But it needed to be admitted that the testing was still in its initial phase.

"If you think it's like getting someone drunk you don't understand what it is you just witnessed," Hexall said to Bill and removed his sunglasses with his good hand. He was wearing them indoors of late as he was having problems with various images creating a black trail behind them as they moved across his field of vision. The lack of contrast between objects in here helped slightly. The lights were especially bright in this break room suddenly and it helped to wear the glasses inside here.

Joachim had been directed to remain here by Sidney Gottschalk until Botev arrived. The book had been a plant by Sidney. It was difficult to say how he knew of Botev's interest in it. He had contacted him strictly as a client in need of extermination services. As far as he was aware TSS hadn't done any background research on Bill Botev at all.

Joachim had been dosed with lysergic acid diethylamide nineteen times by Sidney Gottschalk before Bill and his DDT canisters strolled into the CIA lobby. Of these nineteen times he had given his prior consent on

all but two occasions. These were the first two occasions he had been in Gottschalk's presence.

"He offered me a cup of coffee during what I believed was an interview," Joachim said noting that except for the excessive amount of added cream there was nothing unusual he could see in the coffee's preparation. Ten minutes after he had taken the first sip the now familiar disorientation had hit Joachim. For a moment he thought he was stricken with the flu. He asked to be excused to go to the bathroom. Instead, Sidney had led him into Experiment Room #1. Everything there had been set up in advance. The same sixteen-millimeter camera that Bill had witnessed trained on Matilda Gertz had been trained on him (though in a different position for the purpose of capturing every facial tic that Gottschalk, still in the experiments' outset, had believed could act as a key to decode the internal state that was being forced upon the subjects by the drug).

According to Joachim Hexall, the experience of LSD was one that was more or less untranslatable into ordinary language.

"It's like turning your brain inside out," he said to Botev though this metaphor really wouldn't do. More like the brain was a receiver and it was tuned briefly to a different channel. Lord knew how LSD could be of any real usefulness in the struggle against the Soviet menace, but men far more learned and practiced than Joachim Hexall were donating vast resources towards the end of discovering a niche for it. These doners perhaps believed that there was an exact dosage where maximum suggestibility could be achieved with a minimal amount of hallucinating. Dr. Gottschalk increasingly was focusing on the last stages of the drug's effects. At that time everything calmed down significantly for a subject. He was left with a certain feeling of openness even when struggling to recall his name.

Joachim Hexall told Bill Botev that he shouldn't necessarily assume that what he believed was happening bore any relation to the perceptions of others in the same room with you.

“I learned that the hard way,” he said, “in between experiments thirteen and fourteen. The realization eventually hit me that I was here as a guinea pig rather than as a fully credentialed officer.”

This sounded like self-pity to Bill Botev and he told Hexall this brusquely.

“They don’t let freaks in the sanctum sanctorum,” Hexall said and held up his fingerless hand. “To them the Company’s an elevated class like the Knights Templar of old. There’s no occasion that they could ever find to take a shine to the less fortunate,” he said. “They see themselves as the guardians of democracy. They are not, for the most part, motivated to do good for goodness’ sake.”

Joachim Hexall thought eventually a crisis point would be reached where the brass around here would either get rid of him entirely or normalize his employment to the extent that if he kept his hand in his pocket he would be as non-descript as any other case officer driving to work from the Virginia suburbs.

“They owe me for what they’ve done to me big time,” he said to Bill Botev then expressed the sentiment that after a fashion he was getting off easy. This substance that they were experimenting with, LSD-25, was powerful enough to drive certain men mad with the first dose taken.

“You enter a dream state from which it is impossible to emerge,” he said to Bill. “It has everything to do with the person’s psychological makeup before the dose is administered,” he said. “It is not recommended for fragile, introspective sorts.”

Project MKULTRA didn’t exclude subjects for possessing these personality traits. Dr. Gottschalk likely assumed there was valuable scientific evidence to be extracted from inglorious human remains. He considered the instantiation of madness as an effective weapon of counterintelligence. Discovered Russian moles could be flown home via Aeroflot in a strait jacket compliments of the U.S. Government. Prior to leaving, their eyelids would be removed surgically to give the impression that the visions they were experiencing excited them beyond the need to blink.

In his indirect way, Sidney Gottschalk had shared such plans with Joachim Hexall. He assumed this was to assert a greater dominion over him. He was intimating what could be done with the drug in his possession. Any more complaints from Hexall regarding his dire circumstances would leave him in a bad way indeed.

The CIA would deny having any relationship with him after they consigned him to the same wing of St. Elizabeth's that Sid Gottschalk had worked in just after the war. Joachim might have claimed to be a case officer himself. But, then again, he was off his rocker! Except for the chemically induced schizophrenia, this was likely the standard operating procedure for CIA malcontents. There were very few amicable parting of the ways at Langley. Ostensibly a civilian operation, the CIA was in possession of a military mindset stemming from its emergence from the OSS years ago. They didn't deal with troubled and troubling employees so well. From time-to-time Hexall wondered how it was that he had managed to stay alive as long as he had.

Speaking of his demise so confidently, Hexall left Botev with the impression that everything he had been saying had an underlying truth to it.

"I need to tell you about my struggle," he told Bill. On a used napkin that he had picked up from the nearby trash, Joachim drew a series of concentric circles. The center circle he shaded black as if it was the center of a bull's eye.

In every conspiracy there were but a few cognoscente. And many fools outside the inner circle who were left chasing shadows forever.

"In many ways I'm just like you," he told Bill Botev. "Just a puppet. You don't know shit about what's going on in these halls and neither do I. Sidney Gottschalk and perhaps Sidney Gottschalk only sits in the center circle. There's no use trying to gain access to it because as soon as you do an even smaller, more select circle will form inside the one you have just penetrated. And all the effort and truth-seeking will have been in vain."

According to Joachim Hexall, the way for Botev to remove himself from this high security building was to take his copy of *The True Believer* and peruse the

chapter on 1917 while walking along the hallway's edge with his head down.

"As you probably know by now you've been setup," Hexall said. "Dr. Gottschalk's playing a game with the world in advance of asserting that he has magic powers," he said. Gottschalk was grooming Bill for something down the road, Joachim said. He didn't have any choice in the matter. It was always a matter of Sidney consolidating his power over you.

"To him, everything's a game. It's a chess match played with living chess pieces. We're pawns and he's a bishop. And who the hell knows who's king."

The doctor always had plausible denial about what was really taking place. As secrecy was the norm here there was no getting to the bottom of anything. Bill or even Matilda Gertz could try and sue the agency to discover certain facts, but the judicial branch of government held no sway in this building. No court order or even federal law would be enough to penetrate the Company's culture of secrecy. Democracy was null-in-void at CIA headquarters. Even President Eisenhower would find his attempts at discovering the true depths of MKULTRA rebuffed, if such an attempt could be imagined. It was just the way it was. Nobody at Langley thought it strange but, then again, few if any civil libertarians were ever accepted into the CIA.

Likely there was ongoing surveillance of Bill Botev by innocent-looking employees that he had passed in the hall.

"Do as he wants you to do and you can leave," Joachim told Bill. "Else you're here for the duration."

The chapter on 1917 would broadcast to all the hallway spies that Bill was willing to play ball. It would stand as an admission that he was a Fellow Traveler. It would open a pathway to his exploitation by Sidney.

"He'd give you a contract to sign except that those too have been outlawed here," Joachim Hexall told Bill.

He told Bill to walk around with the book open. He told him to smile and make the briefest eye contact with those he passed. Eventually the elevator doors would open for him. He would be free to leave. This was apparently a test to measure Bill's ability to follow

directions no matter how absurd they might be. He had already failed the first test involving the ability to not talk to Matilda Gertz. And if he wanted to eat dinner at home tonight, he would bear down and pass the second test.

"You know what's good for you," Joachim Hexall said. "Elsewise they would have had you tied to a chair in that room already. You've seen things but you still know how to behave. It's an admirable quality. You'll make a good lap dog for them when it is finally your time to be called. I see it in you already," he said. "You're more like them than me. I see all that left wing talk that you have spouted is just excuse making to disguise the coward that you really are."

The page that *The True Believer* was open to, which, Hexall had averred, was only the goddamn page he had read in the whole book was, not coincidentally, the same page Botev was to start reading if he wanted to make it home for supper:

People who see their lives as irremediably spoiled cannot find a worth-while purpose in self-advancement. The prospect of an individual career cannot stir them to a mighty effort, nor can it evoke in them faith and a single-minded dedication. They look on self-interest as something tainted and evil; something unclean and unlucky. Anything undertaken under the auspices of the self seems to them foredoomed. Nothing that has its roots and reasons in the self can be noble and good. Their innermost craving is for a new life—a rebirth—or, failing this, a chance to acquire new elements of pride, confidence, hope, a sense of purpose and worth by an identification with a holy cause.

What any of this had to do with him, Botev thought, was entirely lost on him, as he seemed the opposite of the person being described in the book. He, in fact, was an apostate. He was somebody who once had a "holy cause" so to speak only to become progressively

disenfranchised with the idea of religion altogether. So likely the Hoffer passage was being forced fed to him in an ironic way to see if he might take umbrage at being lumped in with those die hard Stalinists who still met once every other week in the back of an old shoe polish factory in Baltimore. To them, the objective record of the past was pure fiction, a type of propaganda that needed to be overcome if not ignored outright. Such individuals were shorn of circumspection utterly. They were fanatics, feverish over the notion of leading a bloody insurgency. He didn't understand why Gottschalk would conflate Botev with them. According to Hexall, Sidney Gottschalk was omniscient or nearly so. But Bill didn't understand what Sidney was driving at by claiming that he was a political extremist.

On another page Eric Hoffer wrote:

> *Where people toil from sunrise to sunset for a bare living, no grievances are nursed and no dreams are dreamt.*

Glancing up from the book just for a moment to reorient himself, Bill Botev found himself off the floor's main hallway. His plan had been to wander around in the main hallway until he heard a lock click open. Presently he was in a large meeting room where two men were having a conversation about the Rosenberg execution. They seemed either not to be aware of Botev's presence or were so indifferent about it that they felt little need to acknowledge it. Perhaps this room was a mere throughway where people came and went all the time. Perhaps such indifference to being overheard was part of the CIA ethos, to train oneself to ignore strangers as a means of protecting one's own anonymity. Somebody in the organization had decided that it was in the instant of making eye contact that so many personal secrets would be revealed. President Eisenhower might have walked in here and be given the same reception as Bill Botev. A good officer needed to be walled up into himself, mysterious as to the perceptions of others. This

technique likely was bound to backfire as the more a person ignored another person, the greater the object of fascination he or she became. In the 1950s, however, the cultural ethos leaned toward this sort of impassiveness. Those in the vanguard of the cold war on both sides tended to frown on outbursts of self-expression. They saw it as a conceit that their side's ideology wouldn't tolerate. They saw it as indiscipline. Also, the desire to flee if only psychologically from the awful battles ahead.

Botev wasn't looking to make friends in the Company anyway. This was regardless of their friendship toward him.

"Julius went first for no real reason," the man slightly nearer to Bill said to the other man who had taken to staring out the room's tiny window. "It wasn't set up in advance by them," he said. "Which was to say, they weren't being given the choice. About who went first, that is. It was a random thing more than likely. Or maybe they felt she was the ringleader and deserved to go last."

The smell of fried husband was still in the room according to this man, when Ethel was brought in. She could tell just by the expressions on those few dozen officials and media members who were in the room what had occurred minutes before.

"It never happened before in the history of the republic, a double execution," the first man said recalling the momentary confusion about what had to occur in between electrocutions. According to the official state executioner of New York, Francel, the usual procedure after the death certificate was signed was to wheel the body out into the morgue until further notice. There was all sort of effluence and carbon scoring in the chair's helmet apparatus that needed to be taken care of supposedly, if a decent set of physical standards was to hold sway in the proceedings. For some reason, the State felt the need to wipe away Julius' shit and blood from the chair before Ethel sat down. It was an impulse far deeper than the reflexive need to keep up appearances. The State wanted to maintain a deeper dignity in the proceedings. Ethel Rosenberg wouldn't hold up her part of the bargain, what with her screaming and her attempt

to clutch on to anything and everything prior to her being strapped into the chair. She managed to thrash her head around violently enough so that the damp sponge they placed in the headpiece for the purposes of greater conductivity came askew on the top of her forehead and had to be replaced. The last sentence she spoke was replete with denunciations of the fascist American state enjambed with proclamations of her innocence. It was a very distasteful display in the eyes of an old Yalie and skull-and-bones member to see somebody meet their maker in that way. At such moments a person's true character was revealed. If this man was in her shoes, he believed he would maintain a dignified stoicism (if any electrocution could be said to be dignified) until the last moment that his bowels were loosed. There was nothing to be done about that, understand, even for a man who prided himself on decorum. This was common biology. By then, however, he would have been saved. He would be staring at a husk of himself merely.

The execution of Ethel Rosenberg took four minutes to complete. Unlike with Julius, the first dose of electricity merely burned Ethel severely and caused smoke to pour out of those orifices that were exposed to open air. With the second dose her fingernails fell out of the tips of her fingers and her tongue was set on fire, but no death sentence was pronounced. Something in her was keeping her alive. Which was a dreadful experience (if not for her then for those who were there to bear witness to the sight). She either was in possession of a fierce will to live or something had temporarily malfunctioned with the chair. It took a third jolt, according to the witness, before Dr. Francel would even check the settings on the godforsaken device. By the fourth jolt she was finished but this was very much in doubt for a while according to the witness. As the doctor himself by that point had declined to check for a heartbeat. He simply held the mirror up in front of Ethel's nose and checked for condensation after thirty seconds. Hardly a full proof examination as she just might have been in temporary cardiac arrest. According to Francel, the casket intended for Ethel was airtight. Alive or dead,

a funeral would be held. Francel was the one who kept guard on the uninterred bodies, but if, prior to burial, there came a knocking from the casket's interior he would take it in stride. It would be his screw up to deal with. He was the one who hadn't checked the chair's efficacy after the first execution. The reason for this was that he didn't give a damn if Ethel Rosenberg suffered. He figured they would nail her in the end. The eighth amendment didn't mean anything to Dr. Francel. He hadn't met a prison doc who had even taken it into consideration in matters related to capital punishment. Until somebody told him different, he thought the eighth amendment an ink blot to be ignored.

The man who had witnessed the execution told his co-worker that all those in attendance seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely. Not despite but *because* the execution of Ethel Rosenberg had gone so horribly wrong.

"They knew exactly what was taking place, imagined what she was feeling, and realized the barbarity of what was happening," the witness said to his distracted companion. He glanced outside the window briefly. Maybe he was surveilling somebody and needed to hop to it. The window looked out onto the Potomac River where a raft was floating by independent of a rafter. This by itself wouldn't have proven fascinating enough to override the common courtesy of making eye contact with someone when they are telling you a story. Likely, the witness's companion had heard this Rosenberg story on a hundred occasions. Perhaps he had been there at Sing Sing all along, and all this was being rehashed for Botev's delectation alone. Those who were familiar with the way the CIA had operated wouldn't have put it past them. Within the Company's headquarters nothing was to be taken at face value. There was so much deception ongoing it was impossible for a visitor to say what was real.

The point for the first witness while in the presence of seared Communist flesh was that ordinary Americans didn't recoil in horror from the aroma so much as exalt in it.

“Smells like freedom and puppies,” he said to the disinterested observer. “Like the scent of barbequed hot dogs on the Fourth of July. Like the well-manicured lawns in enviable neighborhoods just after a gentle summer rain.”

He realized that their collective struggle wasn’t in vain. After inhaling a bit of dead Ethel, he realized America would win the Cold War.

“I supposed we all would have grabbed him and plastered him good,” the witness said when asked by his companion how he would have reacted if on the third jolt somebody in the audience had jumped in and demanded that the execution be halted until its humane prosecution could be assured.

The witness composed his thoughts before continuing.

“After fat old Ethel was scraped off the chair,” he said of the theoretical interloper, “he would have been the next to fry. Nothing personal, you understand. But that’s the fate that awaits big mouths of every stripe in the Land of the Free. We Americans have ascended to another state. We are at a supreme remove from the civics classes bromides and the universal rights of man and such claptrap. We aren’t in a mood to put up with anything. We were looking around each of us searching the other man’s eyes for a sign of weakness. When we see it, we will pounce. Democracy was a beautiful dream that we had together, and we didn’t want it to end. We hated the Rosenbergs for their betrayal of democracy. We felt to a man they had gotten exactly what they deserved.”

It was not such a surprise then that after Ethel’s remains were collected the witness found himself in a fugue state whose details he was finding it increasingly difficult to recall.

“I don’t remember driving back here from the prison,” he told the other man who was presently slumped over in his chair. He seemed oppressed by the first man’s testimony, as if he couldn’t wait for him to shut up. He seemed inclined to jimmy the window open and jump from whatever floor they happened to be on at the time. It didn’t matter to him what would become of

his fragile form after the fall. He wanted relief from the expanding moment's oppressiveness. He was desperate enough so as not to be embarrassed about proclaiming his misery to the world.

The witnesses' sole point was—and always would be—that he had never departed from Sing Sing's execution chamber. He had in fact been born there, raised to adulthood there, and would die there, in agony and benightedness as if a chained animal being forced to ingest hallucinogenic substances constantly through his food until the synapses between brain cells gummed up with enough pollutants so that they ceased to function.

"If I was to take out the .38 they gave me when I became a case officer," the witness said to the second man, "and shoot you right in your goddamned face, it is my contention that far from bleeding out, you would merely look at me in askance then smile. 'Now you are aware of the great secret of the world,' you would say to me and gently remove the crushed bullet from your sinus cavity and hand it back to me. To you it would be an occasion of wistful pride like having a son graduate from college. It would make you aware of time's flow. It would be a cause for contemplating your own extinction due to Adam's sin."

"The Rosenbergs didn't have to die," according to the second man, "only so that we can make up stories of their demise." His face was still turned towards the window. This was disconcerting to Bill Botev as he simultaneously reached for the copy of *The True Believer* in Bill's hand.

"Do you want to give it to me," he asked Bill. "Or should you just begin to tear the pages out one at a time and eat them until you've internalized the message completely?"

Immediately Bill Botev placed the book on the windowsill and walked away, suddenly confident that he had fulfilled whatever secret requirement was demanded of him. So, it was when he reached street level that he too had a brief notion of being back in another time and place altogether, independent of the current flow of data pouring through the eyes and ears. When held out in front of him as it was, his hand seemed to be changing

shape. It was morphing into something other (and perhaps less) than human.

Matilda Gertz was discovered strolling around the parking lot and carefully as he might Botev approached her and asked her for her name.

She told Bill Botev she never had a name and never would.

“It has all been a bunch of lies,” she told Bill Botev and fell face first into the parking lot pavement. It was just then that he realized that what she was saying was deeply expressed. He resolved then to get his hands on as much acid as he could. He resolved to learn Dr. Sidney Gottshalk’s secrets entirely.

Like other true believers he wanted to make himself into a brick to be thrown. He wanted a new ideology to follow.

Among Whispers (November 2003)

I.

Look, it's Master Yoda!

He's in New York's legendary Times Square jerking off—*the* Master Yoda, a careful writer would say, a Lucasfilm property, secondarily a Jedi Knight and exile of the swamp planet Dagobah. As opposed to all the other Master Yoda's of the Greater New York Metropolitan Area, earthlings all, uber-nerds, many self-named. Frauds, in other words, and not worth the space it took to print their true names.

Espied in the shadow of the new M&M's Store (in whose space once, absent a raid by the vice squad, Miss Annie Sprinkle daily demonstrated for all interested parties the mysteries of female genitalia via magnifying glass and vagina puppet (vuppet) whilst reclined on a velveteen-lined couch at the fabulously proportioned Melody Theater, Forty-Eighth between Seventh and Eighth, Kleenex available at the box office for the paying customer) Yoda seemed at the moment indifferent to the possible criminal charges he was inviting upon himself.

"My guess is he's doing it on a dare," Don Roberts told Rob George and zoomed into the troll's (or whatever phylum Yoda actually was a member of) mid-section, eager after the money shot, as it was often called. He was staring through a pair of roof prism 20x binoculars gone gradually dusty from non-use over the years. "I'm assuming," Don said, "there's somebody's waiting around for him with bail money nearby. I'm assuming he knows exactly what he's getting himself into."

Not much of this sort of impromptu street theater readily available for the filth connoisseur nowadays at the Cross Roads of America, but every little bit helped. The 20x binoculars were too low res to get a good gander at the Jedi Master's friction point from Don's eighth floor office anyway. These office windows were grimy with the accretions of the latest Disney-inspired atrocity that had marched down the Great White Way days ago to the dismay of so many. Mickey Mouse's b-day, something fantastical like that had been the pretext for it. Some purely corporate event shoehorned by the powers that be into a real social occasion. Disney had lit smoke pots and shot off fireworks and tossed fake ticker tape down the canyon walls. They had cordoned off whole city blocks and forced unfortunate office workers in the area into monstrous detours. Most heinously, because of the smoke's residue, Don was suffering from impaired vision and missing what amounted to a unique occasion in post-9/11 New York. But Manhattanites had long since been conditioned by Giuliani's reign of terror to sublimate all anti-social desires into mere acts of private grumbling or dewy-eyed reminiscences over NYC's licentious (but inspiring) past. Nowadays to violate the admitted vagaries of public decency laws was a truly daring act especially in the midtown of 2003.

The area had long since been given over to child-tourists. Times Square as well have been an overgrown shopping mall in Weehawken, New Jersey, for all the vertiginous thrill it provided a thrill-seeking man. It really wasn't part of the historical continuum of Manhattan at all. It was tragically American in its present incarnation. A forgetful Potemkin reconstruction of the real day.

In lieu of a proper *shmeckel*, Don Roberts believed, this Yoda was in possession of what looked like a curvilinear gherkin significantly smaller than the sprightly kosher dills that they served at the Carnegie Deli several blocks south.

"This Jedi Master was shortchanged by Mother Nature, I'll wager, but now he's making up for it," Roberts told Rob George when frustrated by his present view of what he had come to think of as the moment's ground zero. He couldn't tell, for example, if the *pud*

Yoda was in the midst of pulling actually belonged to the putative human underneath the makeup or if it was a prosthetic, merely being manipulated for shock value. If it was a fake shmeckel, lawyer Roberts knew, the lewd and lascivious bust that was sure to come down would be hard to make stick. One could reasonably claim a bit of artistic license as a plausible first amendment defense in this instance. Nobody, not even one of this city's overzealous assistant DA's, could rightly claim the digital manipulation of a fermented cucumber as anything but satirically intended. There would be no obscenity to be discovered in the act at all. It would all be mere fodder for the *New York Post* eventually, on the front page in a thirty-point header: *Feel the Force!* Its prosecution would be indefensible simply as an expenditure of taxpayer funds. The entire case would likely be quietly dropped before it ever went to trial.

Back in the eighties such an impromptu bit of anti-social expressiveness that he and Rob were watching used to keep Don Roberts spellbound. So much so that he would usually order lunch in from the deli downstairs rather than miss out.

"Back then we had standards about all the mayhem that went on down there," he said to Rob who of late had shrunken back into his hoodie like a tortoise into its shell. "We were connoisseurs of mayhem," he said. "We were jaded like Roman citizens in the Coliseum's back row watching a lion make a meal of a Christian. No ordinary spectacle would make it seem worth our while," he said. "We wanted sex, violence, all of it together rolled into one. We wanted them all to suffer but not unduly. One or the other of them had it coming to them if only because they were out there to begin with. Stupidity and ignorance have a moral dimension just like violent acts. Stupidity is worse than violence in many ways because its perpetrator seldom is aware of its presence. Brutes can reform themselves after all given enough motivation to do so. Dumb asses never do."

No mere passed out drunk being passively rolled by a pimp-whore combo would stick with Don and his officemates. They wanted a type of dynamic encounter between body pleasure enthusiasts.

“We liked to spot tourists being mugged in broad daylight,” he told Rob, “If only because it was relatively rare and the outcome was always uncertain.”

At such times he would constantly adjust the same pair of 20x binoculars he was presently staring through. He would try to distill the moment down to its horrific essence. Sometimes the victims went down on their knees and tried to beg for their lives. Sometimes they swung on whatever junkie-zombie was doing the mugging. This would usually allow them to make it out of whatever shadowy crag of the world’s only man-made canyon far enough so that help could be summoned. Just across from the Port Authority garage, twelve of New York’s Finest would be crouched on motorcycles, still as gargoyles as if awaiting magical activation. In those days they had apparently not yet received the mandate to actively police, merely to constitute an authoritative presence in the area. Despite this police presence, crime in Times Square proceeded unabated. Aggrieved victims would literally have to touch the cops on the shoulder to attract their attention. The gargoyle cops seemed disempowered simulacra of the real, motivated, yet heretofore invisible NYC police force raring to take back the town. Try the world-famous cheesecake at Lindy’s, 53rd and 7th Avenue! It’s the best there is. Take in a Broadway show afterwards, but always remember to walk in pairs. Read the official tourist literature of the day produced by the city about walking to and from Times Square. It always counseled prospective victims (tourists) to stay calm. It also provided helpful advice on how to wrap a tourniquet when there was precious little time.

In lieu of cigarette breaks, Don Roberts would descend from his office into the Times Square alleys where the muggings occurred. He would look for evidence of the scene of the crime and cherish the rare bloodstain that he located as if it was proof that he was not crazy. Back then, the bloodstains gave Don hope for his professional future. It gave him a sense that there was a fundamental, albeit brutish reality to the universe. Certain truths, such as innate human violence, could not

be elided so easily. It gave him hope that if he managed to survive his life would eventually return to normal.

In this instance, however, there was no underlying truth (which was to say, violence) to the street theater on display. Merely, Don assumed, masturbating Yoda was a bit of pornographic camp that would not result in anybody's arrest let alone in anybody's hospitalization like in the old days.

"I think the fix is in with this character absolutely," Don told Rob noting the relatively centered location of the display. To him, this signified that this Yoda was merely showing off, that he had meant to be seen and was not some compulsive onanist in the grips of an obsession. For somebody merely interested in the obtaining of illicit sex for himself, such forwardness was a completely counterintuitive strategy. Likely he wasn't engaged in a real sexual act at all, merely a simulation of such. Viewed from such a great distance and with inferior peepers it was genuinely hard for Don Roberts to tell. Like in the old days he might venture down to street level to have a look for himself. On hands and knees, he would check the pavement for minute amounts of bodily fluids seeking out objective confirmation of his prior vision. But on this occasion, there would be little sense of wonder for him to luxuriate in. He knew the stakes were distressingly low. He knew it didn't matter much even to Yoda himself whether he was faking or not.

Usually there was an emotional element to such lascivious displays that needed to be respected. But in this case, there was an underlying middle-class smugness to it that dimmed one's interest in the outcome. It was dimmed to the point that one had no interest even in examining the evidence deeply. *Hipsters* they called the callow youth of New York nowadays in the midst of a simulated rebellion. Don was old enough to remember the term used for other, far more adventurous urban dwellers who would routinely journey uptown to Harlem in search of weed and sex and jazz. Nowadays the term was mostly a term of opprobrium. Very few young people would cop to being a hipster.

The scene on display was a hipster display, he felt, self-consciousness of its own naughtiness which might

well prove to be faked regardless. It was so unlike the rote muggings of the 1980s which would proceed in a business-like way explicitly because of the tension that was experienced by each party. It was real drama taking place wherein death for one of the participants was a distinct possibility even if it was by accident.

“They had a script that they were following whether they knew it or not,” Roberts said to Rob concerning these more or less daily occurrences. For the most part the knife or gun that was used in such events was held at hip level, its possessor assuming that the authority that the weapon’s mere possession conferred would be enough to construe a successful argument about shutting the fuck up, not signaling for help, and handing over one’s wallet and wristwatch. The victims, too, once cornered and isolated were even more motivated than their attackers to proceed crisply, misreading the gulf between the stated threat before them and the real one. They were pushed into a situation where either courage or humiliating acquiescence was demanded of them. Their strategy it seemed was to expedite the drama so a shadow of doubt could not creep into their own nervous outlooks. They needed time to reorient themselves to the new reality, to decide on what sort of classification of human they fell under. So they were in haste to shut off the decision-making capacity completely. They felt every decision they made was the wrong one.

Of course, money or a wristwatch was not worth dying for. On the other hand, it was hard to dispel the notion that surrendering all manner of dignity in the face of threatened violence was mere cowardice masquerading as shrewdness. It seemed like an acquiescent victim was giving something dear away when he knuckled under. Roberts always believed the smartest play in such a situation was for the victim to simply go passive, neither acquiescing to nor actively resisting the mugger’s commands. They should merely stick their hands inside their pockets and wait the mugger out. Eventually panic would set in with the mugger and he would likely take off. Though they didn’t usually show it, the level of terror of many muggers usually exceeded that of their victims. They weren’t

psychopaths generally, merely junkies with habits to feed. At worst they were full of the sort of self-pity that over time would ferment into notions of entitlement. Throw them in prison for any amount of time and they would invariably seek the sanctuary of protective custody. They were punks in waiting and merely acted hardened. They were scared shitless about what they were attempting but lacked the guile to find another way around the lack of bread.

Don Robers understood that nowadays junkie-dom was a strictly middle class domain whose plinth and walls were supported by the overly prescribed painkillers that irresponsible doctors wrote for their whiny patients.

“The son of one of my partners is a heroin addict,” Roberts said to Rob for the first time putting the binoculars down out of lack of interest. “They’re all very open about it as if it’s nothing for them to be ashamed of,” he said. “He gets his fix from some high-level source,” he said. “Mom and dad buy him fresh needle and syringe sets and watch him fix at the kitchen table sometimes to see if he’s doing it right. They don’t want him to make mistakes. They don’t want him hurting himself by letting an air bubble into his blood stream which would cause him any amount of discomfort or heart palpitations.”

Times have changed in this regard, Roberts knew, and in this instance, changed for the better. This even an old time New Yorker/curmudgeon like Don Roberts would admit albeit through clenched teeth and a skein of false memory about the pleasantness about How it All Used to Be.

“Back then,” he told Rob George who he knew couldn’t have given a rat’s ass about such reminiscences, “living in the city was considered a badge of honor. If you had money, that is, it was a badge of honor. Simply because you could easily have moved away at any time. You could consider yourself tough or loyal or just too ornery to leave because of the danger and hassle that life in the Big Apple entailed in those years. It didn’t matter really why you stayed as long as you had the wherewithal to leave. Whenever you met a stranger in this town back then they would ask for your

address. And you would tell them. Then you'd watch their face for signs of appreciation. I'm sixty-two," Don said, "and I've lived on the Upper West Side for the past thirty-five. Back then details like that mattered. They could make you for a punk if you admitted you took the train in each day from Connecticut. They could make it seem that you weren't tough enough to take it."

Sometimes even back then Don Roberts would walk to work down Broadway and recall for his fellow lawyers the varieties of propositions he would receive from various grate-sleeping vagrants, many of whom congregated in Columbus Circle each morning to receive the southbound pedestrian traffic like raptors in the midst of a swarm of migrating birds.

"It got to the point that some of them, the bums, would actually know my name," he said to Rob, "as if we were former intimates at some level and could be counted on to do a good deed for the other guy whenever they were desperate enough to ask."

The only time Don felt the need to carry a gun those days was on those occasions when the area's mental hospitals would temporarily dispose of their liabilities so as to make their budget for another month and thus avoid permanent shut down at the hands of whatever comptroller they answered to.

"You could pretty much set your watch to it," he said to Rob George noting the first week of December in the years of 1979-82 being the time when an infestation of schizophrenics would occur almost as a natural event in Times Square. Well, look: no prejudice against anybody, but when a six-foot four inch two hundred forty pound recent straight jacket wearer approached you in a forward way and demanded to see the interior of your sinus cavity (to check for the presence CIA bugs) there arose in one a natural animus against that person. Don never had either the intention or the opportunity to shoot anybody, thank God, but during those years he had ruminated deeply on the what-if possibilities involved in gun ownership. By 1987, he had gotten rid of the gun entirely. He simply felt the worry outstripped its potential lifesaving capabilities. And the liberal Dinkins administration by that point was trying to make gun

ownership all but impossible. He didn't need any of these headaches. He figured he'd trust in fate, less so the NYPD, and simply run at the first sign of trouble.

Bars on your apartment windows and a resistance bar resting underneath your doorknob. A resistance bar was a device that made it almost impossible to kick a door in at least unaided within the space of ten minutes.

"It's impossible to imagine when you look at the city now," Roberts told Rob noting with some disdain the retreat of Master Yoda into the back of an Econoline van with New York plates. The public lewdness might have all been a photo opportunity merely, a type of visual gag aimed at hipsters to be uploaded onto one of the new video sites such as YouTube for the delectation of so many. It's the sort of pointless vulgarity that young people seemed to conceptualize as comedic nowadays. If they intended to charge anything for the pleasure of watching, however, Lucasfilm quite rightly would hand their asses to the perpetrators. This Master Yoda was *the* Master Yoda, you see, none other, and a billionaire's intellectual property. It could be established as such in court. The copyright laws of this great nation always tilted toward corporate interests. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act passed in 1998 encoded such tendencies in established law regarding internet presentations. The term "intellectual property" had come into wide use in legal circles only in the Digital Age and then only as a cudgel for those empowered interests to wield as they might. The notion that ideas or their literary/artistic referents were explicitly different from material goods had never really been given a thorough consideration in U.S. political circles. Most of the courts that heard such cases conceived of themselves as duty-bound to allow for the absolute protection of corporate-claimed ideas. They didn't believe there were any first amendment rights at all involved in the adjudication of copyright law. They didn't believe that ideas and art were in the realm of public domain as they had been for millennia, independent of personal ownership despite their authorship and therefore immune from commercialization, let alone somebody's property that

one could do with as one saw fit independent of the public good.

The defendant's problem if Lucasfilm decided to move against them was that because of Title II in the DMCA the web hosting service they used would be compelled to remove the video in advance of any lawsuit lodged against them. They would never get their day in court to plead fair use. As a simple complaint lodged against the ISP would be enough to do the trick. The law was written ignorant of the vagaries of free expression. The DMCA was a corporate cudgel wielded against any citizen that the corporation felt they had the right to silence.

"They don't really have a great deal of concern for individual rights nowadays," Don, who was a first amendment lawyer said to Rob George euphemistically trying, if only out of a belated sense of professional duty, to steer the conversation back to professional matters. He was aware that he was billing Rob for what amounted thus far as the mere pleasure of his company. He was aware that he had performed no legal work thus far for him.

There was a cache of classified CIA documents that Rob had recently come across and he needed protection from the government when they came after him. Don was aware of the danger that being in possession of such documents signified for any private citizen. He was aware that at some point John Ashcroft's justice department would move against Rob robustly to suppress the information therein.

While Rob had no right to be in possession of classified material, his status as a legitimate journalist traditionally would have shielded him against government prosecution. There was a great deal of legal precedent for honoring this distinction. In normal times Don would be counselling his client to sit tight and protect his sources. The Feds would usually prosecute a reporter only to get him or her to reveal the source of the leak. They didn't have any real motivation to create a martyr to the first amendment in the eyes of the public. They would want to proceed quietly, making a case for treason in stages over the course of months.

Usually, they felt the involvement of the media in such cases to be a secondary annoyance and more or less beyond their purview as executors of the public will. They generally recognized the need for a free press if only because of the cover it provided to various crypto-authoritarian operators presently enmeshed in the power structure. The allowing of what appeared to be independent points-of-view established their mainstream cred. Their strategy was to co-opt, not to disallow. They realized the prosecution of a person who was at best an accessory to the crime was counter-productive for them. Deep down they likely had as much esteem for the fourth estate as they did for *la cosa nostra*. Both groups to them were self-interested entities existing as parasites within the larger culture. These were both antithetical to the orderly world that the oligarchs were intent on building. They needed to be eliminated but in a clever, mostly surreptitious way.

It was Attorney General Ashcroft that Don Roberts found especially appalling as he seemed, in contrast to his administration cohorts, driven by a religious mania that argued against any sort of moderation when it came to meting out justice.

“I met him once at some ABA gabfest in Washington,” Roberts told Rob George once the disposition of his case was finally being discussed. “He struck me as one of those people who never had a bad day. That is, he would never admit to a weakness of bearing even slightly as if it would be considered a grievous sin. The laws of God and the laws of men had fused for him. He was unwavering about his need to uphold a given federal traffic statute, for example, just as he would be unwavering about his need to uphold the whole of the Ten Commandments. To waver with support to one was to waver with support to all. He viewed the law as always above the mere desires of mortals. He saw himself as a temple priest. That which was unimpeachable in its authority must never be questioned, let alone usurped. The subjective opinion of right and wrong should never be allowed to contaminate truth. There was no real ambiguity involved in the

interpretation of any statute. For him it was the simple matter of following through."

While serving as governor of Missouri, Ashcroft methodically started busting adult book stores for health code violations based on the semen residue in the stroke booths. He vetoed funding for an AIDS clinic as governor arguing that those the clinic served had brought the illness on themselves. He was so rigid in his application of right and wrong it was impossible for a non-simpatico to predict his actions accurately. To an outsider he seemed a mere mad dog bent on revenge for society's heathen ways. It likely hurt his feelings that people thought him so mercurial, but his reputation persisted. He was like a man from the eighteenth century set down into the modern halls of power. He practiced prosecutorial restraint but only in the eyes of those who saw the application of thumbscrews as a nod toward progressive penology. Don't ask him about the culture in which we all swam circa 2003. Secretly he saw the 9/11 attacks as a judgment of God on America but was loath to express the opinion openly. He was above all a political animal. He knew better than to openly speak his mind.

Long story short for Rob George was that at most other times he might have considered himself safe if not untouchable. But during the G.W. Bush administration, less than two years after 9/11, it was difficult to tell where the boundaries lay. Short of ratting out his source in an immunity deal there was no real protection that Don had to offer Rob. In the same manner of Richard Helms, he could simply set fire to the cache of paperwork with a CIA's classified watermark on it. And that would be that. Once out of his possession there would be nothing to trace him to the papers. He could simply deny ever having laid eyes on the documents and invite objective proof that he was lying. The documents were all from the fifties and sixties, having to do with the notorious project MKULTRA. They didn't have anything to do with the war against Islamic terrorism. There was no way even an overzealous prosecutor could establish an espionage case against him or his informant if their contents were revealed in a court.

“You would have thought it was all a matter of settled history by now, that they would have been declassified completely after the Church Commission launched their investigation thirty years back,” Don Roberts said to Rob upon first learning of their contents. MKULTRA had long since passed beyond the permeable boundary from secret program to urban legend. Presently it was a punchline for the few topical stand-ups still left in the world. Likely most of the names mentioned in the papers had died of natural causes by now or at least were so deep into their retirement that it wouldn’t have made a lick of sense to alert them to the fact that their names were being associated with the program. Hardly a hot button issue with the intelligence community really, this program, but that didn’t mean that they could eventually make something out of it once Rob started publishing his results. Cool-headed analysts would struggle to see a connection between the airing of Company dirty laundry and President Bush’s newly coined war on terror. But a humorless operator like John Ashcroft invariably would make something of it. To him, all independent voices were either enemies or potential enemies. He tended not to differentiate between oppositional forces. He saw Al Qaeda and *The New York Times* editorial board as distinct aspects of the same hostile monolith. Post 9/11, he conceptualized his duty as being more to protect than serve. He assumed the courts would eventually proscribe any unconstitutional behavior that his department demonstrated. So, he didn’t have to think about the Constitution very much. It wasn’t really his job to worry over the Constitution, to worry if his prosecutions jibed with traditional American views of civil liberties. Above all, he believed in the legal process. This was his stock line given to both Congress and reporters whenever the subject of civil liberties (on rare occasions) came up.

In John Ashcroft’s view, it was blasphemous to distinguish between a leaker and a reporter. If only because in the eyes of the law the reporter might be guilty too.

“The denying of freedom of speech in this country is and has always been a stool with three legs,” Don

Roberts told Rob George, initiating a familiar spiel. He began to draw a diagram in the air with an index finger. “Presently you have the law, the media, and the educational system all doing their level best to proscribe what is daily spoken of in this country. They attempt in many ways to punish those whose speech departs from a scripted norm. There is no debate about this,” he said. “Me and you both know what freedom of speech is. Freedom of speech is being able to shout, *fuck you, nigger cunt* repeatedly while standing in Columbia University’s graduate library steps in a Wonder Woman costume. But think about all the complaints both tortious and criminal one would be subject to if that was attempted. Groups of police would arrive on scene and fight over who had jurisdiction in this matter. Later, the lawyers from DC Comics would arrive with their cease-and-desist orders still steaming out of the judge’s ass it was shitted out of. So, think about that the next time you have it in your heart to praise the Land of the Free. In my judgment, Nat Hentoff is the only clear thinking American we have left,” Don said to Rob. “You can learn a lot from him if you’re in the mind to do so. But I don’t think they’re going to let him be around much longer.”

In preparing his case, Don said, the best course of events would be for Rob to write down the why’s-and-wherefores of how he had come across the classified material. So that it could be safely stored away in Don’s safe in case any unfortunate accidents would occur with him.

“These are dark times we are living through,” Don said to him, noting that it also might be wise for Rob when not in the precincts of New York City to buy himself a gun.

“Don’t fool yourself about the Company and their mindset,” Don said to Rob noting that most of their field officers were law school dropouts too unlettered to get into the FBI. So began Don’s familiar recitation about “black bag jobs” initiated by the CIA at the behest of the State Department, sometimes against U.S. citizens. This was a subject that Rob George should be deeply knowledgeable about given his present status. He had been researching his book on former TSS head Sidney

Gottschalk now for over a year. He likely knew all about the evil that was involved in maintaining the American Empire's security apparatus. He likely knew all the dirty tricks and civil rights violations and instances of out and out murder that burnished the CIA's reputation as a force for evil. Probably all the files in Rob's possession were old news to a veteran civil libertarian.

Maybe it was best for Rob to get rid of them after committing them to memory as best as he could.

As in Don's view the appetite for such information that the Gottschalk book was sure to expose lacked an audience, post-9/11.

"We've become a nation of cowards," he told Rob, concerning the reading public's limited appetite for dark truths. "We've given ourselves over to the comforts of authoritarianism," he said. The shades to his office were now drawn and he intended to get down to business. Rob wasn't an expert about the economics of publishing, but he certainly felt that the time for serious political journalism was passed. Nobody wanted to know about their government's true nature. This was standard behavior with those oppressed by authoritarian rule. Best to go to sleep and imagine oneself in a new sort of political situation altogether. Such futile longing was the psychological state that every authoritarian regime desired of its citizens. If a frustrated man denied the everyday reality put in front of him, he might as well have been hypnotized. When not hypnotized eventually he eventually would grow restive over authoritarian rule. It was hard to say what would then happen. Insurgencies after all were made to be crushed, not merely co-opted or compromised. The corporate media as ever would side with the thugs. Tax breaks would be offered to the conglomerates that owned the mainstream outlets to co-opt them. And the independent outlets would be marginalized by the type of orchestrated campaign that the CIA was expert at and had used many times often overseas.

Realizing that his book's upcoming failure was entirely the fault of a compromised democracy as abetted by a compromised electorate should have driven Rob George to despair. But he was still mainstream

enough in his political views (i.e., hypnotized deeply enough) to see the failure to be entirely his alone.

"I still can't get my head around the subject," Rob told Don speaking of Dr. Gottschalk particularly. Even after several thousand hours of research including day long interviews with the man himself, Rob was having great difficulty drilling down to his essence. Sidney didn't seem to be intentionally elusive but he seemed still an entirely withdrawn presence despite all evidence to the contrary. He was at the center of the chain of command, but all his operatives seemed to be able to operate without any direct input from him. He knew what was going on as the entire program was his brainchild. Somehow there was no single "smoking gun" attributable to him. He was rather a nearly passive presence by all accounts. The levers of power that were available to him had not yet been uncovered by Rob. He couldn't say really what crime Gottschalk was guilty of. Sidney might be the worst human rights abuser in U.S. history, but the evidence had remained elusive. The man simply floated above the facts, merely advising his superiors about a particular course of action and leaving it to others to incriminate themselves with the plan's details. This couldn't have been pre-planned on Sidney's part. Nobody was that prescient as to anticipate the judgment of history fifty years after the fact. Nobody was that calculating to have founded a new, albeit monstrous branch of research yet be entirely in the dark as far as every major decision made within that program.

The classified documents that Jim Kane (or maybe somebody else) had provided to Rob in a sly manner months ago had proven to be helpful. If only because now he could at least conceptualize himself as a martyr to the first amendment. This was when they made Rob a target of an investigation.

"I think somehow they've all been parsed," Rob said to Don of the papers in his possession. "Not redacted in any way but parsed. I mean, examined beforehand and given to me with a specific purpose. Which I believe is to reveal what they wanted revealed. It wasn't a whole document dump after all as if a filing cabinet had been unloaded. They're different documents from different

periods," he said. "They have been put together to tell a single story. Some of them contradict each other. Which is a way I think simply to get under my skin. Some of them cite other programs of which I've never heard of as if they're trying to get me to ask these specific questions of which I have no interest in asking."

There was no factual evidence to support this claim, of course, but the paranoia and suspicion that he had experienced ever since meeting Sidney Gottschalk had been so pervasive that now there couldn't have been another explanation for the documents and their collective lacunae.

"I'm saying to you I think there's a deeper truth here that needs to be explained far beyond what these leaked documents suggest," he said to Don. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments for example to which several of the papers alluded to was presently a matter of public record. But there seemed something deeply incomplete to Rob about the records as if the program's official exposure (and the subsequent letters of apology written to the victims in 1998) was itself a type of cover-up, a partial revelation of the truth to dissuade further inquiries of the subject. A young Sid Gottschalk was obviously present in Alabama at least for eighteen months, but did you know that the program's decades long director, General Smith, had in fact been one of the first Allied inspectors on scene in 1945 at Mengele's lab in Auschwitz just after VE day? According to the official report he was brought in as an observer to Nazi atrocities by the Red Army but stayed for several months.

The official story about how the Tuskegee Project was created to control a specific disease never jibed with the expanse of the operation. The CIA wanted to expand the local operation nation-wide beyond the Black community. They had all sorts of interesting experiments that they would wish to try on people of all colors. Smith, or whoever it was fully in charge of the program once the CIA co-opted it, was thinking big. They conceived of a war on-going that needed to be won. They were not civil libertarians. Likely they gave little thought to the

monstrous acts they perpetrated in the name of freedom.

Rob George believed that Gottschalk was using the Tuskegee experiments as a dry run for what would become project MKULTRA years later.

“He had this ability to abstract from the present moment. Which allowed him to think any number steps ahead of anybody else,” Rob spoke of Dr. Gottschalk in the past tense (though as far as Rob knew he was still alive and inhabiting the same small house in suburban Washington that he had visited a year ago). Like many investigators of the recent historical record, he couldn’t connect the still living man with the informational surrogate found in the documentation. This was because for such people the past still seemed a living world with its own reality, not so much a sloughed off skin, but a carcass that had given birth to the present age. There couldn’t be two people with the same identity existing simultaneously. So, the Sidney Gottschalk of the present moment would need to be subordinate to the Gottschalk of the past. Rob was too far in already to examine his own motives.

He hadn’t re-interviewed Sidney or even requested to do so. He didn’t trust the 2000’s version of Sidney Gottschalk. He didn’t understand that man’s relationship to the Gottschalk of the 1950s. Not just him. He felt most people were strangers unto their own history. Rob George was as cynical as they came in a way. He didn’t really trust people of any stripe. He liked facts about people more than their usually unreliable testimony. He would only talk to people as a convention of his profession. He didn’t believe their stories generally. He thought most people were unacquainted with the truth.

The link between Tuskegee and the newly formed CIA, aside from Gottschalk himself, was Gottschalk’s boss for thirty years, the presently infamous Josiah Dorset. For twenty-five years, Dorset acted as a type of house grand inquisitor for the agency while attempting to root out double agents. He made more enemies than the number of moles he routed out. In 1978, he was given a gold watch and told to beat it.

“The program of drugs and hypnosis was largely driven by the counterintelligence people,” Rob said to his lawyer, “Those who had a supreme suspicion about their fellow Americans.”

According to Rob George, after MKULTRA’s initial negative results, Josiah Dorset likely would have been the only true champion of the program. This was given the in-built limitations of what was possible.

“The protocols the program was developing would only work when the subject was held in isolation for many hours or even days,” Rob said to Don Roberts and fought the urge to wipe a runny nose. Well, let it run for all it mattered to him now. He had been promoted out of the requirement to observe social convention. He saw himself as a knight on a quest. He didn’t have time to deal with such niggling matters as a runny nose. Or rather he shouldn’t have had time. It bothered him slightly that he was still looking around for a tissue. He felt at the very least Don should have been understanding enough to offer his client a sleeve to clean himself on.

His point was that only counterintelligence would favor such protocols. Because the physical infrastructure that was required for mass mind control would only be available in America or one of its Cold War allies.

The KGB couldn’t go grabbing their American counterparts off the streets of Stalingrad for days on end without rousing extreme suspicion. MKULTRA techniques were only practical on Soviet double agents who could be isolated for extended periods and possibly reprogrammed. Perhaps the techniques could have high value for recruiting civilians into the government’s service. He didn’t have any definitive proof that this was occurring, but he assumed apart from the dosage-levels experiments that were perpetrated unknowingly on many US citizens, there was an on-going CIA program of kidnapping and attempted brainwashing of many foreign nationals. Josiah Dorset wanted to cultivate Soviet bloc sleeper agents. His dream was to produce hundreds of “deep” sleepers, which was to say agents that were unaware they were agents. The LSD was a mere precursor to obtaining a theoretically possible (at least

according to Sid) deep hypnotic state with full access to the unconscious. Once inside, an operator could set about creating an entirely new personality for his own ends. Such a sleeper agent would be effective because he would not have any secrets to reveal. He would act with perfect obedience to the American government knowing no other truth but that which was recently provided to him He'd know what to do instinctively but not know why he was doing it. Perfect agents and furthermore perfect models for future U.S. citizens. Eventually such reprogramming would start in kindergarten stateside. The LSD could be mixed in with the children's apple juice. By age seven there'd be no individual left for the state to suppress.

So, in a way the entire drama of Cold War espionage was just a dry run for the establishment and maintaining of the American fascist state after the war was won.

"I truly believe," Rob George said, "that this was what Gottschalk had in mind the entire time. For decades he had planned it without his boss's consent. I don't think there's a single instinct for patriotism within him," he told his lawyer. "I think for him the CIA was all a dry run for something bigger."

Sidney Gottschalk knew what his boss Josiah Dorset didn't know. Which was that the Cold War was simply an extended attempt at mass control of restless citizens exercised by two fading empires. To him, it didn't matter who won or lost the Cold War. He would have happily went to work for the Soviet Union. According to Rob, Gottschalk didn't have much faith in his fellow men. He thought the only way society might survive is through controlling those who might tear it down.

A loner all his life, Sid had placed himself at such a distance from other people that he couldn't really make an honest assessment about their inherent value.

"I don't think he ever had a true friend let alone an intimate," Rob said about his subject. "His mother he didn't seem to care about at all once she went batty on him. I don't think he ever visited her once he got to Harvard. I don't think it ever entered his mind even to do so."

Other people could do things, move things, build things. But, then again, so could soul-less machines. Sidney Gottschalk could never move himself to sing other men's praises, citing their increasingly declining usefulness. This he likely saw as the sort of unmentionable truth that only a true scientific genius would have the courage to internalize. Unlike machines, however, humans were bereft of OFF switches. They needed to be brought under the sway of what amounted to a master algorithm. Their independence needed to be substantially curtailed if only for their own benefit. It needed to be curtailed completely so that no further reinforcement would be necessary.

In his presently dilapidated state Rob George could not passionately disavow any of this. But he felt Sidney's plans for humanity needed to be brought to light regardless. Dr. Gottschalk's values were not the CIA's values. And the CIA's values at least in those decades when MKULTRA was active were certainly not as wholesome as the values of the Founding Fathers.

These beliefs were insidious mostly because they were hidden beliefs, left unstated even by the man who held them. Eventually, Sidney should be forced to admit them. Then defend them in the light of current events. The Cold War had long since yielded to the so-called War on Terror. The Islamic world obviously had their own mind control methodologies and was busy enacting a sleeper program of their own against their old enemy. Rob George didn't think such notions as the need for the near elimination of personal liberty should have fallen on deaf ears. He didn't think that the wave of Palestinian suicide bombers recently released against Israel, for example, would increase calls for greater humane treatment for the Palestinians, at least not in Israel. He didn't think the non-Islamic world (which was still archaically termed the West) was in the midst of planning a charm offensive against their enemies once the rhetoric had been dispensed with and real resources were dedicated.

Regardless of if the world was finally in sync with Sidney's views, such views still needed to be exposed.

“We are not microbes in a lab created for the purpose of experimentation,” Rob told Don Roberts.

Despite his lengthy research Rob George still hadn’t written a word on his subject. He still couldn’t find the single crystallizing sentence or even a phrase that would buy him a philosophical toehold into what he had come to conceptualize as an almost vertical sheet of dissembling and lies. The facts about Sidney Gottschalk had already been committed to Rob’s memory. But somehow, they refused to penetrate Rob’s imagination. He was and likely would always be an enigma to Rob. Because of this, a more dexterous writer would have known enough to write around Sid Gottschalk. It would be like carving out the still sweet flesh of an apple with a rotten core.

Of late (and for some strange reason) Rob couldn’t admit he had hit a literary wall. He still felt himself on a public service quest. Something in his life had put him on this path beyond the story itself. Likely he needed to write this story. He needed to state the truth, any truth, but in dealing with Sidney, no truth could be found. He would likely never finish or even start. He wasn’t a serious, professional writer anymore, i.e. one who could make a deadline. Valery Song of late had stopped taking his calls. Optimistically the book’s completion was another year away and Valery knew enough to get out of the way of one of her writers bent on career suicide. She had come to see the entire phenomenon of writer’s block as merely the enacting of a type of professional death wish. She had no sympathy for a blocked writer. This was one of Marta Trask’s pearls of wisdom. But this blocked writer Valery felt sorry for.

Eventually Rob supposed he would be forced to show up unannounced in Lafayette Publishing’s offices and make a scene. This wouldn’t be until months down the road if only because he had his hands full with the obtaining of classified documents. He assumed that once the publisher was made aware that one of the documents’ authors would soon be in the news daily over the leaked files, Mr. Krantz at Lafayette would warm to his project considerably. This was regardless of Valery’s objections. He would ask for the editor of his

choice or, ideally, ask for no editor at all. Even a little jail time for him would be as nothing if that sort of indulgence from the federal government was gained. Of course, he still had no book to give Lafayette. He would bluff his way through negotiations with them. Eventually he supposed the writing would commence. By then, he might have enough leverage to extend his deadline out to forever.

It's all about being a star. Or at least being taken seriously enough to be available to foist one's wishes upon another person. Because that person might have an agenda of his own. Jim Kane had made this clear as his own motivation for giving Rob the un-redacted files several months before when meeting him in a D.C. parking garage. The resemblance to Deep Throat's method of communication had not passed uncommented on by Rob before the handoff commenced. For him it only added to his suspicion that this was all a put-on by Jim. That this entire meeting had been arranged merely as an extension of Sidney's Gottschalk's will. Rather than, as Jim would go on to claim, a thwarting of it.

"I'm not his prize sheepdog, some sort of person without a mind of my own," Jim said of Sidney once the briefcase holding the four-hundred-page binder was slid over to Rob just out of the pillar-created shadow where Kane insisted on standing. Here was another *All the President's Men* reference, this time from the movie. It was hard to tell from Jim's tone of voice if he was joking and the pillar's shadow obscured his face. Gottschalk who had "retired" from the Company nine years earlier under pressure from Congress was still supposedly in possession of enormous sway within the organization. Hard to believe Kane after years of acting as Sidney's lickspittle had suddenly grown a pair and was risking life in prison for what he had alluded to in the meeting as his "values." Besides self-preservation, Jim Kane had never demonstrated to Rob that he had values. As a point of personal pride on several occasions, he demonstrated his contempt for those that did. Jim Kane was just that kind of guy. Ex-jock, ex-marine, ex-husband of a woman who had filed for divorce from him years back on grounds of spousal abuse. To judge by this history, he

hadn’t appeared as somebody to be in possession of a political conscience. In Rob George’s experience such a lack of conscience was not remedied by time. Conscience did not simply sprout from the body naturally like a new toenail.

It seemed that Rob George was being lied to. But given the circumstances this was expected.

“I’ll let you know how much of this I find useful,” he told Kane during the handoff and made sure to turn his back on him. He felt the need to stand up to Jim Kane, to stop being the butt of his jokes. It was an old high school thing with him, a type of forwardness that sometimes worked with the football players he was trying to impress but mostly didn’t. When he turned on them in this manner, often enough something would be hurled at him occasionally with enough velocity to injure. Nevertheless, he couldn’t break himself of his backtalking habit. He felt the key to becoming a jock was to assume their obnoxious traits. He didn’t feel somehow it had anything to do with being good at football or anything else. He saw all these men, Kane included, as being essentially unworthy of their status. Therefore, he couldn’t connect belonging to any sort of meritorious act.

Presently the documents were sitting in his desk drawer back in his Arlington apartment ready for the shredder. Soon after receiving them, he had scanned each page and burned the images onto several CDs. He was excited at having them in his possession for the first two weeks. It felt like something important journalists ought to have possessed. But his disappointment rose with his knowledge of their contents. These were disconnected findings inviting a master narrative. He assumed that this narrative, once formulated, would be patently false. He began to see by degrees the reason Kane had given it to him in the first place.

Sophisticated people nowadays didn’t lie to you so much as state incomplete truths as a type of intellectual boundary condition for the self-invented paranoid narratives that would invariably follow.

“They’re always aware of the effect their words will have on their listeners,” Rob said to a man named Henry Frog he had met an hour after splitting from Don

Roberts' office. He had taken the subway south to Canal Street and gradually found himself wandering aimlessly in Washington Square Park. He had no real agenda now. He was simply wandering around killing time. His train back to Washington wouldn't depart for another three hours. He didn't know anybody else in the city anymore worth hanging out with even for an afternoon. He hadn't been downtown for any appreciable time since he left New York for good. He wanted to revisit his old haunts and see how they've changed.

Many of the rotting places of his youth had been bulldozed under or been subjected to the old treatment of gentrification wherein improvements to these residences were made and then the tenants removed through means both legal and quasi-legal at once.

"I just came from the East Village," he said to Henry Frog pointing in that general direction on the other side of the Washington Square Arch. "It's like an alien invasion had descended moments before I arrived. Unrecognizable. It's like something out of a scene from a romantic comedy now. A horrid romantic comedy. They've got white kids walking around there now unaccompanied. Except for the cabs and the tenements, you'd have trouble making out what part of the city you were in."

Not that Rob was complaining. As only a damn fool would romanticize the East Village of the 1970s and early eighties.

"You used to come back from a walk with broken glass shards in your sneaker soles from all the disposed of vials," he said to Mr. Frog and thought of a particular scene. One day in 1982 some Puerto Rican kids saw Rob walking alone from across the street and just started giving chase. They didn't seem to want anything except to beat his ass or maybe worse. Two hundred yards into the chase he had thrown his cash and watch down behind him as an offering, but they still kept coming. They didn't seem to want to catch him just slowly exhaust him until they could casually take what they wanted from him. They were fucking with him of course but fucking with him in a truly heinous way. They might have let him go after the first ten blocks. But this chase

went on until four in the morning and wound through a swath encompassing four of the five boroughs of Manhattan. They were deadly serious about doing something evil to him. Even to this day he believed that this was true.

“Always they were about thirty feet from me waiting for me to stop or turn around and fight. The easy thing for me would have been to stop and confront them,” he said. “I thought to do that once but one of them kept on flashing a homemade knife at me and smiling like he couldn’t wait to use it on me. The blade was made from a piece of rusted rebar that he had taken from one of the construction sites around here. Just a prison shiv that must have taken him days to file down to a point. He had a bunch of white tape at one end that he used as a handle. It was something to be used rather than shown off. It was the sort of weapon somebody would make only in desperation. A ghetto blade made for ghetto jousting. Even lowlifes like them could see that knife as something to be less than proud of. You’d only show something like that to someone at the last moment if you had an intention of using it on him or her.”

When he finally made it down the subway stairs, Rob recalled jumping on the first train that came by. The thugs jumped on right after him huddling around him without making eye contact and occasionally flashing their weapons at him.

“Whatever they were going to do,” he said, “they were going to do whenever they found me alone. They were very calculating in this way,” he said, “just waiting until I panicked and ran off to the bathroom or something. Maybe they had done this before. They seemed content to have it go on for hours. They knew what they were doing. They had a goal in mind and were prepared to wait for a while to get it. You could tell they had everything worked out in advance. They were good at stalking people. They were having a good time with this. Might have been what they did to pass time. There was nothing hurried in their motions as if they were on the verge of getting caught.”

It had gone on so long that it had taken on the logic of a dream to Rob. As if it was happening to another person altogether.

“When I found a police station at ten thirty that evening,” he said to Henry Frog, “I thought everything was over. I thought I was safe. The cops wrote up a report and looked around outside on my behalf. I didn’t have enough money for a cab home, so I had to take the subway. Big mistake because that’s where they had been waiting for me. So, it began again as if I had never been safe. It went all over the city for hours on end. I swear to God this is true. I was always trying to lose them. I didn’t want to go home because I figured once they knew where I lived, I might as well go ahead and kill myself. They wouldn’t stop after that. They wouldn’t have left me alone until I had cashed it in.”

The way Rob escaped, that is to say, the way it ended, was a mystery to him. Into the early hours of the morning he had zoned out. He assumed he would be killed and was just waiting for it to happen. Somehow life went on and he found himself back in bed the next morning. He had to break into his own apartment, he recalled, as he had chucked the keys at them. The truth might well be that he was deranged and was still out on the streets of a still fetid New York City running for his life. Everything past 1982 had been a sort of barely recalled hallucination for him. This fragmented sense data made more sense for him rather than the actual historical record of New York as he understood it.

“Nowadays, when I walk down First Avenue,” he said to Henry, “which is the same street where I first saw the gang, I start flashing back to it. Which may be a way of telling you that I’ve been there all along, that this experience is an illusion, and that experience is the one that’s real and on-going. Maybe you are something I’ve made up all along,” he said to Henry Frog and pushed one finger into Henry’s gut. It overhung his rainbow suspenders like a frozen wave. It didn’t yield in the manner that Rob was accustomed to but merely distended slightly in the manner of a bit of heavy rubber being pushed.

He was still undecided about what he believed. He assumed he would not know completely until the hour of his death.

Despite his paranoia, Rob George conformed to all the social dogmas.

“I understand that it’s best not to rock the boat anymore,” he said to Henry. “I understand that none of us are free. But the best way to fix that is to keep your mouth shut and try to destroy the system from within.”

This book project of his for instance was one attempt to maintain a veneer of professionalism even as he began to doubt the world’s fundamental reality. Constantly he would approach rank strangers and talk to them much in the way that he was talking to Henry. Just for a little while such conversations set his mind at his ease. It made him somewhat certain of where he was now and what situation he found himself in. He wouldn’t be worried about the sudden fear so much anymore welling up within him. There was suddenly a perfect explanation for it all. He wouldn’t think of himself so much anyway as being crazy simply because he acted in inexplicable ways.

Henry Frog was out on the square advertising for his one-man Tour of the Old Village.

“It’s exactly what I was looking to see happen,” Rob said then suddenly thought briefly about this strange coincidence. In reality, things that a man wished for seldom appeared right in front of him. Only dreams proceeded in this manner. Even then there was an uncontrollable element to them. Nevertheless, he had no reason to doubt this reality placed before him. He had already stuck his finger in Frog’s belly to find out how real he was. Short of cutting Henry to see if he would bleed, there was nothing Rob could do to confirm this was something more than a madman’s delusion. There was no real work that he could perform to set his mind at ease.

Henry Frog charged twenty dollars for the ninety-minute excursion of lower Manhattan. He didn’t live in the city anymore nor did anybody he knew. He couldn’t afford it. He created this tour for people like him who loved the city even as he was being barred from it. Most

people nowadays were as ignorant of recent New York history as they were of the mystical notions of various dead religions. Most didn't know the exact coffeehouse for example where Bob Dylan first played any more than they did the agents of ritual purity in Zoroastrianism. With the advent of so much wealth and architectural revisionism came a great forgetting. It was only natural. Because as the buildings (or at least their facades) were destroyed obviously the memory of what had transpired in them were destroyed too. Nowadays nobody had known the history of Greenwich Village even up to the early Nineties. Every now and again a glimpse of some former mode of existence such as Jonas Mekas' still standing Film Forum on Houston Street would reveal itself to the walker. But once the buildings vanished their attendant histories vanished with them. Nobody could separate that new Banana Republic, for example, from the dive bar that it used to be. Nobody knew who Dylan Thomas was much less where he died. It was all lost to the wrecking ball, according to Henry Frog. That is, until a person took his guided tour.

On his tour, Henry started walking around the West Village and pointing out each literary landmark as quickly as they might be recalled.

"Edna St. Vincent Millay, I think over there," Henry Frog said to Rob George when pointing out a particular set of condominiums where row houses once stood. Presently even Frog was having trouble keeping track of all the architectural turnover. Not only buildings were lost but their addresses were as well. So, to point out a particular building as so-and-so's former residence was preposterous on the face of it. There might have been a small patch of dirt somewhere underneath one of these structures that the author of *Love is Not All* once swept from her living room. But that was as much of a connection as could be made. Supposedly there was once a plaque in place noting Edna St. Vincent Millay's residence but that too was removed recently. Mayor Giuliani like his culture served mostly at Yankee Stadium. He was an opera buff supposedly, but Caruso never lived in New York fulltime. Unlike in the Lower East Side there was never a preservation committee with enough pull to

make a difference in the Village. It had all been given over to the tidal whims of the real estate market. Eventually every connection to the past in NYC would be plowed under. City planners didn't give a shit about bohemians or their cultural strivings. Eventually the name of the neighborhood itself would be changed and then even Henry Frog would have no cause to continue with his attempt at explication.

The rooming house where Leon Trotsky initially stayed before moving uptown was of special interest to Henry given his sympathy to the former Red Army head. Trotsky's allegiance to what he saw as the pure communist vision rather than the corrupted politics of the KMT stirred Henry. He saw a purity in it though it was a psychopathic purity, a monomania for which Trotsky was thoroughly punished once on the lam in Mexico.

"Trotsky never executed a man that didn't deserve it. He never wiped a village off the map of Europe without them first attempting to be talked out of their bourgeois ways," Frog noted to Rob, who was busy staring into the building's third floor bedroom window. A Giacometti reproduction was on prominent display there and he was attempting to ascertain what sort of pedestal it was resting on. He wanted to know how cherished such a sculpture was to whoever had owned it. Maybe they used the goddamn thing as a paper weight for all he knew. He wanted to know if this was the case.

Other than scrambling up the fire escape to look for himself, Rob found it hard to say.

"In the evenings while in New York Trotsky would provide a recitation of Marx to all those on the rooming house floor," Henry Frog, who sometimes while drunk went by the name Froggy, told Rob George. "Many of these residents were first generation immigrants and lacked the ability to read. They were generally grateful about what they heard and generally wanted to hear more. In his memoirs, Trotsky would recall such recitations as one of the most satisfying moments in his professional career."

"Trotsky," Rob George said briefly wondering if he could make a jump for the fire escape ladder. "Trotsky's

eyes pick an ice pick. It is quality designed for maximum leverage at a moment's notice."

In Newgate penitentiary once on Cristopher Street, Frog recalled, the standard punishment for bad behavior was having one's head placed in a burlap hood for weeks on end. There were holes for eyes so that a prisoner could read the Bible that he was provided with when entering through the penitentiary gates. There was a third hole near the mouth that allowed for eating and breathing not to mention screaming to alert the warden just in case a prisoner would want to confess.

"By any reasonable standard today," Henry Frog said flicking off a ladybug from one mutton chop, "we would consider such methods barbaric to the point of obscenity."

Nevertheless, commentators of the day considered Newgate a model attempt at liberal prison reform. There were no beatings in Newgate for breaches of prison rules, for example. The food that inmates were entitled to generally was delivered regularly and was never withdrawn as a punishment. There were constant attempts at the psychological upkeep of inmates which in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries translated to a rigorous course of religious indoctrination. To its sponsors, Newgate Penitentiary was a place bathed in the white light of moral goodness. Only some type of crude provocateur would determine its practices inhumane. Within its walls there was enforced silence twenty-three hours a day. The cells were four feet by ten feet to encourage the physical stillness necessary for contemplation of the Holy Word of God. There was a special block for inmates near death that was not guarded at all.

The prison was closed at the turn of the century when the much larger and secure Sing Sing penitentiary was built upstate. Eventually Newgate's exterior was leveled and many of its blackish bricks went onto form the cornerstones of new churches of the area. Architects of the age all saw the stones as a type of blessing. In a less religious context they would have called it a good luck charm.

“The stupidity of men is something that never ceases to amaze,” Henry Frog said to Rob George. Here was a rote line that he had muttered over a thousand times. Henry didn’t believe good luck charms had any place in a society dedicated to rational discourse. He thought it was up there with praying to the loa for mercy.

They had walked to the East Village where the stupidity of men might be on full display. These weren’t Henry Frog’s personal sentiments, but he was trying to set the scene. A tourist was supposed to have the scene set for him. On Henry’s tour the history of a certain part of New York was presented in the raw.

In Tompkins Square Park, Henry Frog said, in 1988 a type of last gasp resistance was waged amongst the outcasts of the world against the sexless and inexorable tide of privilege and money.

“I was amongst those that gave their all,” he said to Rob after setting the scene of that fateful night in August. According to Henry Frog, all the park’s homeless had been crowded into one corner against the same iron fence that still existed. He said that they hadn’t as a group had a notion of committing violent acts against cops or anyone else for that matter until they were cornered. Henry said the cops to a man were out of their skulls that evening. They were the ones that had instigated everything against an (for the most part) unarmed citizenry. They lacked the appropriate crowd control training to handle such matters in a neat, legal way. They were the aggressors and the criminals on that night. They were the ones who should all have been Mirandized then thrown in the Tombs for safekeeping as had been the case with so many ordinary park dwellers and even innocent bystanders who had taken a look to see what all the commotion was about.

Dozens of people were injured including Henry Frog himself. He had suffered a lacerated spleen resultant from the windup of one of his fellow resistors making ready to launch a homemade projectile at a cop’s head. He had taken part in the class action suit charging police brutality before it had been thrown out of court. This misfortune had set Henry Frog on his quest to reclaim the common history of the area. He saw the

gentrification of the Village and the Lower East Side as a pointed political war against collective memory. The economic arguments put forth for gentrification held little weight for him. He saw a sinister purpose involved in real estate development.

That was Henry Frog: an anachronistic loser. He couldn't help the way he felt about such matters. He saw meaning in sociological events. When there was merely a persistent pull of commerce. Commerce was blind to itself and the havoc it wrought. But Henry Frog somehow couldn't help believing that there was a meaning to political events.

The occasional protests he and a few of his "colleagues" on Bushwick Avenue would stage were impromptu off-key chants of The International. This was with various grunting noises substituted for where the words had been forgotten:

Arise ye workers from your slumbers
Arise ye prisoners of want
[grunt grunt grunt] thunders
And at last ends the age of cant.
Away with all your superstitions
Servile masses arise, arise
{grunt grunt grunt grunt grunt]
And spurn the dust to win the prize!

Not that their present East Village audience, almost entirely white and connected with the financial industry downtown, would enjoy this rendition any more than they had if every word was precisely rendered.

"We've had beer bottles lobbed at our heads from out of fourth floor windows," Frog told Rob George. "Also, cops called on us sometimes even by those who an hour ago had signed our petitions on the street."

Presently, unlike in 1988, there were no confrontations with the police that arrived in such instances. Most people had never heard of *The International*. Being a Communist or even a Commie symp like Henry Frog (like most Americans he saw himself above matters of petty ideology) in 2003 was akin to being a revived saber tooth tiger thawed out of a

glacier's bottom. The theoretical threat that such a being presented was meaningless when held in comparison to the novelty of being around at all. Young people would stop and ask Henry about *The International* simply because they found the dogma so droll. Frog and his pals were like the beefeaters around Buckingham Palace, quaint novelties of a bygone age. When they came around the Village with their Marxist literature, Japanese tourists would stop them and want to take a picture with them. Even by their own standards they were losers. But, on the other hand, the flow of dialectical materialism was inexorable and unidirectional. Henry could look around the East Village now and see and the entire bulwark of capitalism advancing towards the grave. It wasn't an illusion. He could really see it. He could see himself spreading dirt over the corpse of Wall Street.

When you crossed Delancey Street into the Lower East Side, Frog said, farce degenerated into tragedy with an alarming rapidity.

"See over there," Henry said pointing to the looming distance to the brown and gray cubes in the distance. "A gentrified development intended for the gentry alone. They brought a Japanese architect in to build these and leveled the surrounding area. They have their own shopping center, rumor has it, existing underneath the building so they don't have to go out and mix with the surrounding community," he said. "Elements of the existing community are still here but fading," he said. "Eventually it'll be like every other place in the city. Young people will read about the Lower East Side in the same way they read about Timbuktu. They will look at the photographs of Jacob Riis and make no connection to the present age. To them it will be like broadcasting from another planet."

The Triangle Shirtwasist Fire, for example, which actually occurred in a still standing building in the Village, victimized workers entirely from the Lower East Side. The victims' families were not compensated for the tragedy. According to Henry Frog, families were forced to reclaim the charred bodies of their loved ones by dragging them behind them down 1st Avenue in wooden

carts like so much over cooked meat bound for the local butcher.

“The rumors you heard about cannibalism amongst the survivors’ families are manifestly untrue. They are a function of the antisemitism of the age,” Henry Frog, whose real name was Henry Goldstein, told Rob George (as if such reinforcement was required). “Most of the bodies in fact were buried in a cemetery in Greenpoint,” he said. “They didn’t ask for special dispensation. Several of the victims were gentiles in fact and received no better treatment than the slaughtered Jews. I’m saying to you that there was no reason to create a hate-based myth. The tragedy was a crime against workers, not against a particular ethnic group. But such calumnies persist unabated. Hard to say where they come from, but they remain. They persist to this day even though they are buried in the false rhetoric of nation states and the rights of so-called indigenous peoples.”

A pro-Zionist leftie being in Rob George’s view as anachronistic as the formerly mentioned saber-toothed tiger (and far more absurd), Rob had no compunction about tearing into Henry.

“You need to get your head out of your ass, friend,” he said to Henry Frog of Henry Frog. “And start living for the moment.

“You see the world through the lens of the past alone. And this lens is just as distorting as seeing history through the eyes of a downtown real estate developer,” Rob said. “They’re both perverse perspectives, jaundiced with self-interest. But at least with the real estate developer you get a nice skyline view for the tourists to gawk at whenever the weather is nice enough. He’s an unreliable narrator because he’s unaware of the history of the neighborhood he’s exploiting. But you’re an unreliable narrator always because your ideology poisons any objective analysis of the historical record. It’s sentimentality you proffer, disguised as a scientific perspective about world events. Cause at least the Donald Trumps of the world are doing somebody some good. If you had your way there’d be no commerce at all down here. Whole neighborhoods would be left to decay at the cost of them keeping it real,” Rob said. “For you

this would seem a better situation. For you it's better because you're so disconnected from the desires of ordinary people. You conceptualize other people's existence as contingent upon soulless economic forces but that's not the case. Research the history of Soviet Jewry without prejudice to see how antisemitic a supposedly egalitarian society can be. Sadly, friend, tourists do care after the ethnic identity of the victims in the Shirtwaist Fire tragedy. And memory recalls that the anarchists were the ones who had started the rumor about the Jewish cannibalism of the workers' corpses to begin with."

Rob's original reason for approaching Henry Frog had been to score some illegal narcotics to ease the boredom of the long train ride to Washington. He should have split once he realized he had tapped a dry narcotics hole. But at least at first Henry seemed an interesting guy and Rob needed somebody to talk to.

Rob George saw all of history as a type of bottomless whirlpool that one should best approach with extreme care when attempting to drink from it.

"I don't think focusing on what came before us will answer any questions about our present dilemma," he said to himself when strolling around Essex Street. By then he was liberated of Frog's presence. This was a nice enough sounding sentiment. But Rob's Washington apartment was heavy with Gottschalk documents, almost none of which were useful. These were all just so much raw material, areas of overgrowth from a project gone off the rails. To Rob this signified not so much obsession as the pitfalls of undertaking a serious biography. History was bunk, according to Henry Ford, but bunk was what the modern reader required. These sorts of projects were ninety eight percent research to two percent writing. And with this project thus far the percentages were a hundred percent versus zero.

What he needed was a fresh start. Or a kick in the ass to set him on his way. Some momentous event needed to happen to make it worthwhile for him. Such an event occurring was not impossible, as to paraphrase the old Chinese curse, we now lived in interesting times. The point for George was that creating a fresh start for

himself was beyond him now. He was powerless in the face of his own inertia. And realizing that this was so didn't make it any easier for him to overcome it. He wanted to focus on finding a reason to give a damn once more. He would have liked to have scored some acid and tripped all the way to D.C. Presently he would be making the trip completely sober. To him it was a huge let down that this was the case. It was one more opportunity to ruminate on his own ineffectual nature. He couldn't believe that he had visited New York and couldn't get high. He always imagined the town soaked in sensuous pleasure. He couldn't believe that on this seemingly dire occasion he had failed so miserably to even scrounge up a single lousy joint.

When you lived in a time when history ceased to matter such disappointments would start to seem routine. As people lacked the sophistication to know when they were being oppressed. They felt their sobriety was a personal failing rather than conclusive evidence of a burgeoning fascist state. Back in the day, Tompkins Square Park would be alive with drug dealers. Rob George missed those days dearly. He didn't understand why he apparently was the only one.

"It's not young people's fault that they're so clueless," Rob said to himself once blocks away from Penn Station. He tucked inside yet another Vietnamese sandwich shop. To look at the cleanliness of the restaurant's floor this place had just opened for business. All the menu items here had pornographic images next to them. As if in ordering a sandwich one was engaging in a lascivious act. At any rate, that was the connection that was being attempted.

The spicy pork bánh mì, for example, was "not for pussies." Right next to the note the picture of Linda Lovelace's moneymaker was present. It was a humor of literalness being proffered in an attempt to avoid the irony so endemic in the culture. In 2003, in America a man could be vulgar about something only when he was being straightforward. In that manner the vulgarity was legitimized by the forthrightness of the sentiment. It got your attention merely. If you were under thirty you probably had a good laugh about it. You probably took a

picture with it on one of those smartphones that could take pictures with the intent of emailing it to your friends later.

Still looking to score, nevertheless, Rob thought he'd try the spicy pork bánh mì just to see what occurred.

"I used to live around here," Rob George said to the sandwich shop's owner, Vinh "Joe" Troi. This was how scoring drugs worked in the old days. You started a convo with somebody and from there steered the convo to the matter of narcotics. Nine times out of ten you'd get a name and number. Sometimes you'd get the drugs on the spot.

So, it was remarkable that after taking the order Joe Troi asked Rob if he had been one of those gawking at the masturbating Yoda up in Times Square.

"Because you look like the type who would do it," was all Joe Troi offered as reason for asking the question in the first place. It was on the news. But to Joe, Rob looked like the type who would have flocked there all by himself to take a look. He looked like a tourist to Joe. He looked like somebody who had a very superficial understanding of his immediate surroundings.

According to Rob George, it was his lawyer Don Roberts that really had an interest in the spectacle. This was only because he was nostalgic for the old days of the area, the days when there was so many depraved acts occurring down there it seemed like the coming of the end of the world.

"They used to go down there and take pictures," Rob said of those in the office building he had just visited. "To them it was like a bonus of working in Times Square. Looking back, it was a sign the city was still culturally vital."

Joe Troi asked Rob if he wanted extra peppers on his sandwich.

"Not for pussies, remember," he said to Rob and served it up to him anyway with extra peppers before he asked.

According to Rob George, the city that surrounded them had changed irrevocably since he had last lived here. It might as well have changed its name as far as he was concerned. He had been walking around for hours

and never sensed that it was the same place he had once lived while writing for *The Village Voice*.

According to Joe Troi, the masturbating Yoda was one of this restaurant's employees, a four-foot ten-inch Vietnamese immigrant who had done the deed on a dare. Somebody was supposed to take a video of what was taking place, and it would go up on the restaurant's website. The restaurant's name and address supposedly were stenciled on the back of Master Yoda's robes.

"The way it is now, we call it guerrilla marketing," Joe Troi said with barely a trace of an accent. "Nowadays the hipsters that live down here will respond only to this. They like making a political statement when they eat. They like to think of themselves as cool but they're not cool. So, they need to have somebody be cool for them."

According to Joe Troi, Yoda wasn't peeling his own chili, but peeling one of Joe's devastating three-inch Vietnamese Black Dragon peppers. These were so hot according to Joe that a release needed to be signed by the customer before one would go on one of Joe's sandwiches. Unless you were a complete madman tears would flow at the first bite. The gurgling shits would be encountered at the ninety-minute mark after painful ingestion has occurred.

"If he was smart, he used gloves when he began to jerk it," Joe said of the diminutive employee, name not given, about his chili peeling exploits. These peppers were hot enough to render chemical burns just by touch. But hardcore Vietnamese chefs sometimes felt it was part of the job and accepted the pain that came with it.

On the restaurant's wall, just above Rob's table, there was the famous picture of the American helicopter taking off from the roof of the US embassy in Saigon. According to Joe, he and his family had been evacuated on the flight before.

"A hectic scene you might say," Joe told Rob when discussing the photo impromptu. "My head was pressed to the floor for twenty minutes by some guy's boot. They wouldn't let up no matter what. They were all scared shitless about what was coming next."

Ten minutes later a couple dressed in identical University of Nebraska sweatshirts and asked for directions to the World Trade Center.

“You mean Ground Zero,” Rob George said. “No, not the World Trade Center. Not the fucking World Trade Center. It’s called Ground Zero now,” he said to them. “They call it Ground Zero.”

The man in the Cornhusker sweatshirt came up to George’s table.

“I know what I mean, friend,” he said to him. “I know where I am. You don’t have to tell me,” he said. “I know what I speak of when I speak about such matters as this.”

Nobody in the restaurant said anything thereafter. Eventually the pair left on their own.

“Not for pussies, not for pussies,” Joe Troi said and asked Rob if he wanted another. On the TV overhead, an embedded journalist was reporting from Iraq’s Akbar Province. He was crouched down in a half-dug trench in a futile attempt to protect himself. He was looking nervously away from the camera at thirty second intervals to see what was taking place behind him.

Bathed in sweat and a four-day beard. He had a gas mask at his side he said for just in case. No WMDs had yet been found. But that didn’t stop him from taking precautions.

Suddenly Rob George knew what his book was going to be about. Without even taking a bite of the sandwich, he had received the kick in the ass he needed.

Such Supple Confusions (August 1957)

I.

So fond was he of poetry and the satisfaction that the scanning of a well-crafted line brought, Josiah Dorset nevertheless found the gradual abandonment of all forms of literature, serious or no, painless. He didn't think so many of the post-war poets had especially much to offer. He found their attempts at versification obvious and effete.

"They seem intent on replacing philosophy with advertising," Josiah said to Joachim Hexall, presently project MKULTRA's acting director, during a one-on-one briefing. "Every now and again I scan an issue of *The Paris Review* if only for Auld Lang Syne," he said. "If only to see who's doing what and how well. Of late, I seldom make it past the tenth page. Many of the poets in there seem more inspired by newspaper headlines than a muse," he said. "Their attempts at iconoclasm are all too obvious. And because of the obviousness they are deeply vulgar."

On Josiah's cluttered desk above all the case files in rectangular folders sat an upturned edition of *The Saturday Review of Literature.* This addition of the Review was dedicated to New Criticism.

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Josiah had written in black magic marker across an especially dour photo of John Crowe Ransom on the front cover. Then below that was a doodle of Old Glory, the American flag.

"I think," Josiah said of the poets in this Nuclear Age, "that they think they're at war with the old guard. I think they don't believe in the established rules of

versification. With them it's all negation and mystery, the poetic enterprise," he said. "It's all free verse and shocking instances of prosaic discourse that they cut up into tiny bits and attempt to market as the latest bleating of the avant-garde. When it's not poetry at all. Almost universally the verse of the new poets is devoid of both meter and rhyme," Josiah Dorset said. "Its meanings are all viewed through these black angular shadows cast by all the broken idols of reader expectation that they have smashed on the way into this new place of theirs. You sense their quarrel with modern poetry even as you sense their inability to go beyond the literary giants they profess such boredom with. They are unintended prophets of the death of culture," he said. "Of the end of poetry, of the death of the singular man," Josiah Dorset said to Joachim. "In a way, Mr. Hexall, we can see their rise as coeval with the rise of the communism-socialism in so many parts of the world. In that it is black nihilism disguised as a type of smug humanism. It's all outrage and authoritarianism disguised as a new mode of thinking for mankind."

Like Communism, Josiah thought, the New Verse with its beatniks and so-called "post-modernists" were bound to sink under the collective weight of its contradictions. But that didn't make the sense of loss experienced through the vanishing of that which it has supplanted any less painful for those cultured individuals with a memory. Those people could well remember the 20s and 30's and a vibrant literary scene. They could recall the works of Stevens, Pound, and Eliot with great reverence. They would be greatly disappointed by what has emerged as a response to their influence. The typical versifier of the Nuclear Age didn't seem to want to work at their craft. They didn't see the point to it likely. No stalwart literary editor apparently was demanding it of them. Standards had slipped immeasurably. Everything had gone slack of late and weak-kneed. Standards really were no more, in art as in society. The audience for poetry nowadays was sub-literary and as accepting as the grave.

On more than one occasion, Josiah, when he had the time to peruse the New Verse, had to restrain himself

from throwing whatever journal he was reading against a wood-paneled office wall. Over the past eighteen months had come a certain painless acceptance at poetry's downfall. Nowadays, Josiah barely had time to skim let alone robustly analyze a given poetry journal. He had admitted defeat long ago. He realized the Marxists had won.

"I've been conditioned by the mediocrity over the past few years to simply anticipate its arrival in advance," Josiah said to Joachim. "There's no need to see it on a page. I know it's there without looking. It might well be unfair to that minority of poets who are actually striving for excellence, but this is where my sentiments reside. I've lost the ability to appreciate poetry on the modern scene and am no worse for it apparently. Don't know what I'm missing likely. On the other hand, it might be that I'm the last unsullied critic in the world. It's all the others who are in need of reeducation on this matter. They're self-delusional if they think anybody's doing good work in 1957."

The worst poetic offender of all apparently was a Jewish beatnik named Allen Ginsberg, most of whose poems Josiah had not read (thankfully). Rather he had read of Ginsberg extensively in his post as Director of Counterintelligence at the CIA. Ginsberg seemed somebody in dire need of censoring by prevailing authority. The court case in San Francisco concerning Ginsberg's poem *Howl* Josiah was following with great interest. He assumed that the literary status quo would eventually reassert itself. He hoped in some way literary standards would be reapplied through the aegis of the courts.

"Walt Whitman as filtered through layers of pornography, propaganda, and subversion," was the unsolicited capsule review Josiah gave to *Howl*. Several agents eventually would be dispatched to the courtroom by Josiah to gather information on American subversives. But also to tip the scales of justice in civilization's favor. He wanted to nip the pornographer-as-poet meme in the bud. He also wanted to know if there was a link to these so-called beatniks or "beats" as they had come to be called and established left wing organizations such as

the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), ten percent of whose present membership were CIA informants. Hard to say what associations there were with the Beats as they didn't seem to represent a fully functioning organization in the political or even social sense. They seemed, rather, a loose association of like-minded and scrofulous young men. It seemed a dry hole from an intelligence perspective. To an impartial observer, the average Beatnik was too disorderly in his aesthetic (not to mention his thought patterns) to make a good agent for the Communist cause.

They were a bunch of guileless know-nothings, it seemed to Director Dorset. It was this guilelessness Josiah found their most annoying quality. To them, the great events of the world had stopped mattering circa 1952. They weren't attuned to the great ideological struggle that was the Cold War. They thought it beneath them somehow to even choose a side. They thought it was a matter for less attuned people than themselves to worry over constantly. As if they had resigned from humanity altogether.

"Solipsism," Mr. Dorset told his subordinate Joachim Hexall when the subject of the *Howl* obscenity trial was broached again.

An ex-Marine captain with no taste for the arts, Joachim Hexall found all the talk of poetry in the context of an official meeting inappropriate and preposterous. Josiah seemed to be trying to make a connection between what he saw as the slipshod literary aesthetic of the late 1950s and the heaving Communist Beast. In Joachim's estimation, the Director was being less than successful in the endeavor. The dossier he had received from the FBI about the beatniks of San Francisco several months ago had been a virtual parody of meaningless conjecture in advance of any verifiable fact about the group (if that's even what it was). A fucking waste of time, in other words, despite Dorset's assertion to the contrary. Nevertheless, a mutual investigation had been undertaken of the San Francisco Beats by both the FBI and CIA. To justify their participation, the Company was alleging that all these crummy poetry recitations and bongo playing in various Bay Area coffeehouses was a

Commie front. Even now somewhere in a Langley sub-basement, CIA operatives were being cued into the beat "lingo" in an attempt to infiltrate. They were reading up the exploits of beatniks chronicled by Herb Caen of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and hanging out at Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights bookstore. They had it down pat by now, they believed. But somehow *The Evergreen Review* kept on rejecting the CIA's submissions. One poem was entitled *I, a Brawny Lad*. Also, none of the beats' so-called inner circle could be turned. Which generally happened when nothing existed to turn from. Innocent people made poor informants even when serious pressure was applied.

Solipsism was a word Josiah Dorset used frequently in relation to Allen Ginsberg and his cohorts. Joachim Hexall had never heard the word before these weekly briefings. As far as he could tell, it was meant strictly as an accusation of aesthetic (or maybe philosophical) incompetence on subject Ginsberg's part rather than any sort of legalistic concept that might lead to this Ginsberg's justified incarceration.

"He seems to have stopped believing in an objective world," Josiah told Joachim about the prominent beat poet. Of course, Hexall thought this assessment could just as easily be applied to Josiah himself.

Allen Ginsberg had of later become the head of counterintelligence's bête noire. Despite his protestations about not thinking about poetry anymore, Josiah seemed to have only this on his mind. He had been betrayed somehow by the literary establishment. He seemed entirely determined to use his position in the CIA to seek revenge against the Jewish-American poet who reminded Joachim of the kid who mowed his lawn in the D.C. suburb that he and his wife had moved into once his promotion went through.

"It's only subjective experience he chronicles," Josiah said of Allen Ginsberg. The bit of lukewarm coffee that had gotten on his trousers' ankles after the paper cup on his desk's edge had tumbled to his office floor was not felt. "Distorted by drug use," he said, "into something unrecognizable and unjustifiable, given that there is no real justification for any art to exist in the first place.

Well," he said to Joachim and grimaced. "*I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn*."

"It's not bad," Joachim Hexall said to his boss and crossed his legs. "Though it's not something I would place on a greeting card anytime soon."

"You're a goddamned white ape bedecked in seersucker," Josiah Dorset said to Joachim Hexall and went in search of a file folder. His desk and office floor were lousy with them. Many were devoid of names or classifications. The files were intended to be read by him alone.

The folder that housed the file on Allen Ginsberg externally was different from the others. In that the yellow color of the paper was starting to turn white from constant handling.

"Ginsberg rejects any notion that there is such a thing as shared experience," he said as a clearing of the throat. "With him one is either 'with it' or a 'square.'"

According to the file, subject Ginsberg was a former resident of Greystoke Mental Hospital in Morristown, New Jersey. To judge by his recent literary exploits, the cure they attempted with him had not taken.

He was a suspected homosexual with all the attendant untrustworthiness and manias. His mother Naomi indeed had been a member of the CPUSA, but she had died last year leaving the Agency with no real conscionable excuse to continue to document his movements. Merely it seemed the aesthete director of the CIA's counterintelligence program was not a fan of his poetry.

To even talk about this person on Company time seemed deeply scandalous to a true believer like Joachim Hexall. Communists were everywhere of late. They were in the north of the half-known nation of Vietnam and in the western foothills of Cuba. But here they were talking about some self-promoting faggot blessed with the talent to outrage. Solipsism indeed. This by itself Hexall thought was grounds for this director's removal. But as of 1957 there was no legitimate chain of command within the CIA to whom he could appeal to at the very

least have Josiah reprimanded over this (as the ex-Marine saw it) swishy blather. It was Joachim's belief that all of Dorset's work ratting out moles over the past eight years had caused him to be somebody beyond control. He knew that Allen Dulles feared Josiah. He knew that J. Edgar Hoover refused to take anybody's calls during meetings that concerned the abuses and breaches of protocol of the counterintelligence director. Dorset was Mr. Hoover's enemy. Several FBI agents had been accused of subversive acts by him and forced to resign. Perhaps out of fear Hoover would not intervene. Perhaps he thought it would all blow over eventually.

Eventually the entire counterintelligence apparatus that Dorset had been building over the past decade would be dismantled and its parts recycled into more productive uses. Project MKULTRA was one of these parts. More than anything, Joachim Hexall had a deep wish that it be concluded immediately. Six years deep into its administration he had come to see MKULTRA merely as a deeply disturbing manifestation of a paranoid mind. There was no real progress to report concerning its mission, which was to establish reliable mind control techniques. He saw the origin of such experiments as an extension of Dr. Mengele's research in Auschwitz. He saw it as an emerging tendril of some monstrous birth.

When there was a fascist takeover of this country, MKULTRA would surely be given its own department within whatever mystical castle they chose as the seat of this government. Eventually they would come to see MKULTRA as an extension of the state's security apparatus, a secret bureau with the ability to stamp out insurgencies before they began.

According to MKULTRA's presiding scientist, Dr. Sidney Gottschalk, if you administered a dose of ninety micrograms of LSD-25 regularly to children starting in kindergarten likely that child's mind would open to you completely like a morning flower following the sun's procession. After this the child would simply accept the reality that was presented to them uncritically and permanently.

“The drug does something to retard the ability to reason or to find discrepancies in any particular set of beliefs,” Hexall told one of his informants, Bill Botev, an hour after the briefing/poetry seminar with Dorset had been concluded. Presently Joachim and Bill were in a small alcove that doubled as a meeting room. A young negro janitor, Henry Worthington, was hovering around them silently going about his business.

Or perhaps he wasn’t going about his business. They didn’t really know. Mentally both men had written Henry off long ago. Presently they had no compunction about speaking the truth in front of him. He didn’t seem worrisome to them even slightly.

All this stuff about the use of LSD-25 as an agent of mass mind control sprung from the memos penned by Sidney Gottschalk. As ever with Sidney, such conjecture was unaccompanied by any real hard scientific evidence. Apparently, he simply assumed that it was true. Somehow, he was never taken to task by Josiah Dorset for the inaccuracy of his predictions. Maybe there was a history of successes that Joachim was ignorant of, and these could be weighed against the failures. But these successes would have to have been so spectacular that they were assigned top secret status at once. Hexall, who had been installed as the project’s director for the past eighteen months, would have been frozen out of the information flow. Maybe Gottschalk had tricked the entire agency in this regard with the staging of a false positive. In his memo he claimed that low levels of LSD administered over an extended period would prove more efficacious as a truth serum than any large dose administered on a single occasion.

“According to him, the only side effect of the drug is that it makes the kids a little dull-witted and results in reduced IQ over time,” he said to Bill. “Knowing Gottschalk, he would attempt to sell this attribute as a positive,” Joachim said. “He would claim it would make for a better class of soldier for the battle ahead. He would tell Josiah Dorset that a certain class of child would be spared the treatment. These would be America’s future leaders and they would be let in on the mystery early on.”

The unseen memos likely did not point out that there would be certain legal hurdles to overcome if the plan was implemented.

“They don’t believe in a free press,” Joachim said, eyeing the lit cigarette between two hand spindles. “Therefore, they don’t recognize that it exists.”

According to Joachim Hexall, it was Josiah Dorset’s opinion that anybody could be co-opted. Therefore, there was no reason to place limits on the Agency’s operation. Josiah was in the midst of fighting a war. But he never bothered to look up from his foxhole and see the faces of his fellow Americans fighting beside him.

Really if any of MKULTRA’s projects and memos, to say nothing of an objective reportage of Dorset’s witch hunts, ever made it to the light of day, a separate prison would have to be built to house the overflow of former CIA officials sullied by patently illegal activities. By executive edict, the Central Intelligence Agency was to limit its clandestine activities to matters of intelligence gathering overseas. Administration officials and the oversight committee in Congress responsible for the CIA were routinely being lied to in official hearings. This was to cover up projects such as MKULTRA. Also, there was the Posse Comitatus Act to consider. This act proscribed the use of military personnel used against the public. Also, there were the various state and municipal regulations admittedly of dubious constitutionality which barred the concealed transport of side arms (except for noted police officials).

The Company would need the overused shield of the Defense Secrets Act to forestall an official prosecution to the point that all incriminating evidence could be eliminated. However, this act had never withstood scrutiny by the judiciary. Even Dorset grew solemn whenever it was invoked as a type of charm against the dark forces of liberty waiting to tear a pious cold warrior into pieces.

When considering these matters, the outrage that should have been concomitant with the notion of being imprisoned for merely being (as Dorset would always put it) the United States’ faithful servant was lost on Joachim. Likely this was because of the rising reservoir of guilt

that had arisen in him because of the many acts against US citizens he had approved during his tenure at TSS.

“I was promoted so quickly because I was likely the only one with the stomach to sign off on all that was being proposed,” Joachim said to Bill Botev.

This was not necessarily true. There were others in the old OSS who were as ruthless as him. Joachim preferred to cultivate the myth of his own viciousness as a hedge against the fear he felt when managing MKULTRA daily. He thought any day now he could be killed or worse. His boss was the most feared man in Washington and his most important employee was a garden variety sociopath with claims on having extra-terrestrial origins. Really, he was completely powerless despite his title. They could do with him whatever they wanted. They would have an excuse for every heinous act. They would slice his body in two and claim it was done in the national interest. As he was suspected of holding subversive meetings intended to harm the United States deep inside his body. Near a duodenal ulcer a framed picture of the Rosenberg’s existed which was all the proof the CIA needed.

After speaking of giving air to such paranoid visions, Joachim Hexall paused. As very briefly Henry Worthington had activated and deactivated an electric vacuum cleaner.

“He calls in Gottschalk at all hours and discusses new procedures,” Joachim told Bill Botev of Josiah Dorset. The LSD in the kindergarteners’ apple juice was only the latest hatched plan of Sid’s that might well have been approved without Joachim’s even having been briefed about it. But if they were serious about trying it (as opposed to being one of Dr. Gottschalk’s frequent instances of Mephistophelean self-parody), in Hexall’s estimation it would be the straw that broke the camel’s back.

Maybe they were attempting to drive him crazy as an extension of MKULTRA. Even now likely they were being observed. This was the sort of mental state Sidney wanted for Joachim. It’s what he had been driving at all along.

“Even in the Marines in times of war there are limits to what they can do to you,” he said Bill. “More than the stomach-sickening aspect of the project itself,” he said, “there’s the likely prospect of the electric chair at Leavenworth waiting for me should it ever get out that this was going on. Once the truth about MKULTRA is known there’s no way I could appeal to the public’s patriotism. The drugging of five-year-olds will never be accepted in America. Agents were supposed to be hired on as school counselors. And in the pilot phase something could be made up about a course for gifted children at a given school. But eventually the parents would get wise and take their kids to non-compromised doctors. They’d be there at the dinner table staring off into space. The parents would want to know what they were teaching them in that kindergarten.”

So flimsy was the political viability of MKULTRA that deputy director Hexall couldn’t help speculating that having the program’s existence exposed was Dr. Gottschalk’s ultimate goal.

“They want to end it, Gottschalk wants to end it too maybe,” Hexall said to Bill. “Because he figures it’s been going on too long and is smearing his good name,” he said. “Or maybe just his name. Maybe he’s got another offer at one of the west coast universities I see him in contact with constantly ever since I’ve started reading his correspondence. He’s fucking bored and he knows this program absent of actual results will never survive anyway regardless of Dorset’s sponsorship. So, he sells project expansion as the last step needed for a breakthrough and waits for the explosion. Gottschalk, I don’t believe, is in his right mind. He hasn’t been in his right mind for many years. Sidney’s crazy but Dorset is a simple disgrace. He is a disgrace to the agency and should be made to resign immediately. His great gift merely is to spread terror. Even a hardened zealous type like Jedgar Hoover is terrified of moving against him. All the moles Dorset’s named up until this point haven’t even been given the benefit of a show trial,” he said. “They’re identified internally and then they disappear. Just like that. Their widows are given a story about an emergency overseas posting. This is what Josiah Dorset

considers to be human decency, a lie that covers up a gruesome death. In his way he may be more powerful than the president. They're all terrified of being named as the next mole. But, then again, accidents happen you understand," he said. "The producing of such freak occurrences the Agency's come to excel at can work for a man as well as against him. It's all a matter of seizing initiative. The higher profile the target the greater the margin of plausible denial will be. It's a simple calculation. But one which is not dissimilar to the type that infantrymen make on the battlefield when operating a mortar cannon. For example, you must understand that the wings and rudders of airplanes might suddenly fail inexplicably regardless of whether there's a VIP on board. You can calculate the odds of that occurring. Surgeries are botched even on U.S. senators and mysterious, life-taking illnesses are encountered from time to time. This is regardless of a high social status and the power that is accrued because of it."

According to Joachim Hexall, there was a room somewhere in this very building that housed at least a hundred different poisons. Many of which were undetectable to present day science.

"They have fifteen chemists at work on it, a few of them ex-Nazis" he told Botev surmising a conversation he had had with Sidney on this subject. "Don't know why they need so many and why a few of them are Nazis but they have fifteen PhD's at work on it. Maybe like MKULTRA they're going after the Holy Grail of mind control but on a parallel path. The want agents under their power. They want them to complete their missions after which they want them to simply drop dead. Their excuse for why this branch of the project exists is that the Soviets are working on their own poisons. CIA has a hundred poisons, but the Soviets have a hundred twenty. Something like that. Some number they pull out of their ass to add oomph to the argument. Really, I'm not sure what the actual situation is. I'm not sure they believe in their justifications. They just want to keep their jobs."

Joachim's point was that the Central Intelligence Agency as it was presently constructed was a profoundly deranged place, an organization entirely outside of

American law and custom. It was a place entirely immune to civilian control. It was in many ways the same type of criminal organization that Hexall had encountered in 1943 when landing in Palermo, Sicily with the Marines. There he discovered that the only cooperation that could be gained from the local population would be done only with the consent of the local Don. This wasn't a fatuous comparison for Joachim. He honestly believed that this was what the Company was now, what it had degenerated into. Eventually it would all be found out and many of them would go to the gas chamber for their crimes against the Republic. Josiah Dorset likely would escape prosecution of any kind, as would Sidney Gottschalk. Hexall had the sickening feeling that this had all been determined in advance. They knew things about the Agency's inner workings that he was not privy to. Unlike them, he couldn't defend himself because he didn't know what was coming. Quitting the CIA at the height of the Cold War would only incur Dorset's wrath. Likely he wouldn't disappear but simply be charged with espionage. They'd extend to him his full legal rights, but he wouldn't stand a chance. People he had never seen before would claim him as their intimate and describe to the court Hexall's fluent command of Russian. They would accuse him of being some sort of master spy. They would insinuate that even now there were secrets in him worth digging up by any means necessary.

Deep down he did not necessarily believe that he had deserved any different treatment. Because all these years at OSS and now CIA spent laboring in Sid Gottschalk's vineyard, made him guilty of many crimes against the American people, even though he was innocent of those they would eventually sentence him to death for.

"Did you bring it anyway?" he asked Botev of the black flag with the hammer and sickle insignia that as of 1954 Joachim had identified as the flag of the international class struggle. The dockworker's union in Baltimore that Botev had infiltrated months ago at the behest of the Agency was of late judged to be lax in its affiliation with radical international causes. The judges

would seek further surveillance and infiltration of such domestic organizations. For example, the FBI. Bill's mission was to seed the union offices with various radical (or in the case of the hammer-and-sickle flag, pseudo-radical) artifacts with hopes to open conversations with employees into what was supposedly taking place beneath the placid surface of a union long ago corrupted into economic insignificance by organized crime.

Dorset feared leftist organizations so near to Washington. He wanted a full dossier constructed for all of these. He wanted to create a map of all the goings on of subversive organizations in the United States. Like J. Edgar Hoover, he seemed to have a mental block concerning the machinations of *la cosa nostra*. He didn't think the Mob existed. Thus, the appearance of so many false positive readings concerning the mafia. There were, for example, instances of large semi-truck deliveries into the dockworker's union hall during the early morning that had been thoroughly documented. Dorset had come to suspect that they were arms shipments intended for the leftist rebels in the Americas, but Bill knew better. The trucks were full of merchandise skimmed off freshly unloaded cargo containers. Routinely they were using the union hall as a warehouse until the stolen property, usually lady's apparel intended for DC-area stores, could be fenced. Oftentimes the merchandise would be sold back to the original distributors from which they had been stolen. It was all the price of doing business in Baltimore. But somehow federal authority was completely blind to what was taking place. They had their own counter-narratives to describe the world. These usually involved subversive machinations. It was much more elevating to stem the tide of worldwide Communism than to break up a ring of greasy thieves who could provide no insight at all into the great struggle of the age.

The black flag, it should be said, was a complete fiction. It was created by a contracted tailor in suburban Virginia for the expressed purpose of fucking with people's minds.

"You put it under your arm and walk around with it."

These were Hexall's instructions to Bill once the flag was handed over.

"Eventually," he said, "somebody's going to ask you about it. You know how to respond. You talk about the meeting that's held every so often in the school basement. All the gobble-de-gook you must have down to a science. You talk about the struggle of the proletariat and so forth. You know how to sling the leftist bull, I'm assuming. You talk about how when you were a child your mother literally worked her fingers to the bone in a sweatshop on the Lower East Side of New York."

Now, the Corbi brothers who ran the Baltimore Crew were dyed-in-the-wool capitalists. As such, they likely wouldn't take kindly to mentions of the plight of workers in front of all these pinched mink coats and sable stoles that they had lined up in the union hall's presently shuttered cafeteria. Motivated for reasons altogether different than political ideology, nevertheless, the Corbis would not be bashful about dealing with a subversive in a forthright way. Already having raised his fears about his safety to Joachim Hexall on several occasions, Bill Botev's alternate plan was to tell one of the Corbis a story about a Baltimore police presence at the hall. He would claim he needed a cover story for all the unusual comings and goings specifically from the loading dock.

"You tell the truth," Hexall said, "which is that you're an ex-pinko now on the Crew's payroll. Nothing more. You say you're using your connections to give the syndicate cover about their fencing. The fact is that membership in the Communist Party is still legal, and the local police have no jurisdiction regarding their activities. Sell it as a full proof plan even though it's not. An ordinary Gambino soldier is likely too dumb to see through the flaws. Apart from somebody who would likely eliminate their way of life for good by firing squad those guineas are probably not aware about what a goddamn Communist is. It's like another kind of gang affiliation to them. Explain it that way and you'll be fine. By doing so we could have out cake and eat it too."

Hexall's entire thrust with this operation was to establish a credible link from the union to the CPUSA. The CPUSA had already been implicated as a Soviet front

as of 1950 when the Subversive Activities Control Act breezed through Congress and branded the party an enemy of the state forever.

"Hoover's going to want to go after them after the CIA builds the case," Hexall said of the union that was in fact a front for the Baltimore Crew. "But Dorset's going to use the information we provide him on this to gain further cooperation from Mr. Hoover on several fronts. More to the point is that the immediate goal will be satisfied. There is a rabid dog on a loose chain in need of being fed, that's all. Dorset does not believe in anything like the tapping of a dry hole when it comes to investigations into the Great Communist Conspiracy. To him, cowardice is merely an indication that you are compromised and a part of the cover-up. Neither you nor I would appreciate federal prison much," Joachim Hexall said. He searched out a package of Marlboros in his shirt pocket. "Be assured," he said, "that if I go down, I am taking you with me. That was part of our arrangement from the start, and I haven't forgotten about it. If I go down, I am taking you with me, fucker. Now more than ever it's something I have plans to follow up on. I don't trust you anymore than I can throw you. And I have a dead arm," Joachim Hexall said.

The weird effect of Joachim Hexall's pulsating irises was caused by the massive amounts of LSD that Sid Gottschalk had foisted upon him years back. The pulsating occasionally made itself known in times like these when Joachim started ruminating on what might be. All the scenarios were bad, and he was struggling mightily to create a new scenario that would be more palatable. He thought his best option now was to play ball until circumstances created a better alternative for him. Eventually it would be too late to act. But he assumed at least he had the better part of a year to ruminate on what to do. MKULTRA as of last year had entered a new and whacky phase that would require at least a slight amount of cultivation before it was abandoned for good. They needed to make a show of the rigorousness of their procedures to Dorset before admitting defeat. Many of the outside scientific consultants they used were near millionaires now

because of the Agency's largess. It's the last thing they wanted, to be booted out of the program. In the world of academia, they would likely be considered pariahs when their complicity with the Company was discovered. Once abandoned by the CIA they would be less than self-sufficient. They were academics who dithered and dallied. They needed institutions to help them survive. More self-sufficient men wouldn't have been academics.

Gottschalk excluded, all non-contractors were ashamed at being associated with MKULTRA. Behind the scenes, many officers were lobbying to be transferred overseas, supposedly beyond the reach of Josiah Dorset.

"San Francisco was the last straw for many," he said to Botev, not looking at all as Henry Worthington, in a single unobtrusive motion, bent down behind Bill and slipped a piece of folded up paper into his pocket. For the past few minutes, Henry had been writing on the paper. Invisible to them, Henry went about his business blithely. He understood why he was invisible, but he didn't protest the circumstances that made it so.

In fact, he had never spoken a word his entire life to anybody. He was eighteen but he appeared near thirty. Nine years ago, he had come north to Washington to live above the garage of a white man who all things considered might be one of the strangest human beings on the planet. This he hadn't protested either. He assumed none of it held any real meaning in the greater scheme of things. It was all a constant diversion. He assumed it would be forgotten within the next calendar year regardless of if he was still living there.

"San Francisco" had become shorthand for a particular MKULTRA endeavor. In 1956 a Tenderloin brothel was commandeered by the CIA, and its clientele involuntarily conscripted en masse into the agency's LSD drug testing program over a span of two days. The local cops had not been alerted to the subterfuge, so invariably several of them got caught in the net. MKULTRA operatives had mixed the acid into the tea the hookers gave the johns as well as into the water cooler out front. When the johns came down from their trips, the field operative on duty had informed them that they were being charged with frequenting a prostitute. They

were then given the choice of clamming up about their involuntary dosing or being arrested and telling a tale that prevailing authority would invariably deny. The johns weren't aware of which agency ran the whorehouse. They assumed it was an SFPD sting operation. So, to a man, they played along and refused to complain about their enforced trips while isolated in a back room for eight hours.

It must be understood that no one excluding Josiah Dorset was likely proud of such procedures. Ex-military men such as Joachim Hexall, however, would always rationalize the need to do so as part of the ugliness of battle. Even if the war that the battle was a part of was only metaphorical.

"Coupla priests we wound up dosing as a result," Joachim recalled for Botev. "One or two minors I think and one or two ballplayers as well," he said. "You don't realize, but a good whorehouse is the hidden social center of a city," he told Bill. "The entire social hierarchy can be met coming and going from its premises at all hours. And if it was to be shut down, another would open within several weeks almost as a matter of necessity."

That they were breaking the law only moderately numbed their guilt over this operation. Which was by far the most widespread use yet of Dr. Hoffmann's powerful drug on a civilian populous. Hexall had fought hard for cancelling the operation based on the reasonable fear that the project would be found out. But Dr. Gottschalk had felt somehow the test was necessary. By then he was experimenting with the dose levels of LSD and assumed that the more one took the greater one's resistance to it became. Basically, the internal guinea pigs at CIA were all used up. And the colleges that such work was usually farmed out to were under deep suspicion by Dorset as the HUAC probes continued and various academics were given the third degree as to the true nature of their politics.

"He only really trusts Gottschalk," Hexall said concerning Dorset's recent sinister turn. "And Gottschalk answers only to himself. With him it's always a studied attempt to get under your skin. I don't think it has anything to do with the agenda of counterintelligence

which is what we're supposed to be advancing. It's preposterous that the least trustworthy person in the organization is being given the most leeway and basically runs the project despite what might appear on an org chart."

Not that Joachim was excessively concerned with intra-departmental politics. As he felt the organization was evil and must be re-built from the bottom up if it ever was to work properly. The San Francisco episode had clued many case officers into this truth. Up until then they hadn't realized how deep the corruption ran in the Agency. Dorset's decadence was above board and pervasive. He controlled every aspect of the program. He delegated very little and insisted on detailed reports. All department procedures were a mirror of his own perverse soul. He was an artist creating a bit of pornographic political theater daily. He was at a far distance from the American tradition of democracy. He was waiting patiently to take control of the secret police when the new form of American government descended against the people's will.

The only way out for the uncorrupted case officers would be for them to arise and stage a sort of bloodless coup. This would involve a serious bit of political maneuvering up to the Oval Office.

"I think Ike might actually be in the mood to take a broom to the entire lot," Hexall said to Bill pausing slightly as the janitor Henry Worthington removed that type of filtration mask from his pocket that one might be more familiar with seeing nowadays on the sort of industrial site where chlorine gas was present in copious amounts. Bill thought maybe Henry had emphysema and required the device to mop the floor using ammonia. It was weird to witness for the two or three seconds it actually occupied his imagination. It might be a new fad of some kind. He had more important things to occupy himself with than the health of a janitor. He thought his own arrest or worse was being readied as they sat and talked.

It never occurred to him that Henry Worthington might be Josiah Dorset's eyes and ears and thus was somebody to fear greatly. Just like so many other white

men of his age and upbringing Joachim Hexall didn't give much thought to the colored race at all. Especially when they were by themselves, and they were not any sort of objective threat. He conceived of such a person as lacking the requisite intelligence to be of real danger. Shines like Henry were always there, mostly in the immediate background. They performed menial tasks that kept the workplace moving along. To him, they were more like mimeograph machines than men. He bore them no ill will. But he never did them the honor of actually fearing them. His fear was reserved for many of the nameless Caucasians who he saw milling around the Langley office. Such strangers seemed to shoot him odd glances at moments when they felt he would have let his guard down.

Having taken meetings with Botev and other operatives in this alcove for many years, now, because of the not so loony assumption that his office had been bugged, Assistant Director Hexall's dealings regarding project MKULTRA were likely well known by Henry Worthington. They were likely more than enough to blackmail him if he had been in the mood to do so.

"We might need to move a little further down the hall," Joachim told Bill when the bleach fumes coming off the colored janitor's mop bucket had proven momentarily distracting enough that he had lost his train of thought temporarily. There was nothing more for him to say, actually. As lucky for Bill the politics of this place didn't concern him so much. It was Bill's assumption that all parties mentioned in these meetings were members of the CIA. That meant they were either clinically deranged or merely evil in the old sense of the word wherein supernatural forces controlled a person's decision-making apparatus to such a degree that, once an exorcism was successful, they wouldn't recall a single act they had committed. They all had a strange way about them that revealed for common viewing their disturbed psyches. Even to somebody who had just wandered in off the street and not known what this place was they would have registered as crazy. They believed themselves at the center of world historical events. But their frat boy exploits argued something entirely counter

to this understanding. So, in this disconnect between ideology and action lay the strangeness of the typical CIA case officer. They didn't seem in any real hurry to save the world to Botev. They had all this money. And all these guns. They seemed hell bent on tearing the world a new asshole just for the weird nihilistic thrill of doing so.

The fake anarchist flag was a typical CIA maneuver according to Bill. It met all its criteria of a Company Dirty Trick simply because:

1. It was undertaken with a minimum of foreknowledge about the events it was meant to effect, and
2. Its creation was prima facie absurd. In that it admitted that there was no reason for it to have existed in the first place.

It's like a dog chasing its tail unto extinction.

Once in the office building's parking lot, Botev invoked this metaphor to describe his present situation to Chip Sheen, a fellow conscriptee. He was struggling for the umpteenth time this year to find his exterminator's truck. The parking lot was enormous and, in keeping with CIA protocols, unmarked. There were no natural markers to identify where you were in the structure.

Actually, a dog chasing its tail, was not an especially apt metaphor for the Company. Now that Bill thought of it, he wanted to withdraw the comparison. Because eventually most dogs would tire of tail-chasing and transition into normal behavior. Whereas the Company seemed locked into such game playing entirely because of its organizational DNA. They realized such behaviors as self-defeating, but they initiated them anyway. They were locked into a fanciful prosecutorial mode by their own paranoia. The paranoia was an unavoidable side effect of intelligence gathering. Knowledge was like alkaline-poisoned water that only made one thirstier as one drank. In many ways the CIA brain trust saw itself as utterly powerless and at the mercy of Soviet-based conspiracies. They were to a man not cool-headed

enough to detach from the game playing. Their approach to intelligence analysis was instinctive and flawed. They were morons with Ivy League diplomas. Their ideology had turned them into idiots. They could never understand why current events could not be controlled.

Bill wasn't dumb enough to actually parade around that made-up anarchist flag in front of the Baltimore mob. So, what he thought he'd do was smuggle the flag into the union hall premises then quickly dump it out back in the containers that the Crew usually reserved for the mass of clam shells that they usually discarded with the left over linguine after an all-night poker game.

"The color I'm guessing they'd hate more than this hammer and sickle," he said to Chip Sheen who was due in a Georgetown hotel in two hours. Chip had driven out to Langley to pick up his suit and handkerchief combo that Dr. Gottschalk insisted that he wear to the job for some reason. A bespoke pinstripe suit it was, imported from Saville Row in London at considerable taxpayer cost. There wasn't any explanation proffered about why Chip would be required to wear such an outfit to an occasion that was as much as he knew about it hardly a formal affair. This was game-playing on Sidney's part apparently. There was some effect about the patterns of the pinstripes on the human mind that he wanted to investigate. Or maybe he merely thought that Chip Sheen looked good in such an assemble. He had been adamant about the silk handkerchief with its polka-dot pattern that Chip was to place in his breast pocket. The clash with the pinstripes was likely the trigger for the effect Gottschalk was investigating. He also wanted Chip Sheen's thinning blonde hair parted in a specific way. He was completely indifferent about how Chip should behave, however. He wanted his wristwatch turned to the inside of his wrist so that if Chip decided to check the time (and he didn't say if he was supposed to) he would be making the same motion he would have when sipping a cup of tea. For some reason.

Many of the Baltimore Mob were first generation immigrants from Sicily. The all black field of the anarchist flag, Botev was sure, would remind them of the colors of Mussolini's MVSN who during the spring of 1927

had marched into Sicily and proceeded to execute as many mobsters that they could locate (that is, those who had not first either paid Mussolini off or joined the black shirts themselves in a play to keep body and soul alive for another calendar year).

"Mussolini did a number on them from what I hear," Botev said to Chip Sheen. "Even now it's all these dagos can talk about. Other than what they call business. They are cruel men but even now they cannot stop talking about the cruelty of Mussolini," he said. "They have a fascist flag in the pool room that one of them took home as a souvenir while in WWII, " Botev said. "I'm telling you that the color scheme is the same," he said. "It's too close to be a coincidence for them. They'll see it and will immediately go for the baseball bats in the closet they only sometimes use for baseball games," he said. "They'll start wailing on anybody they think who might be associated with the fucking black shirts and maybe for hours. Real animal types absolutely. The black flag will get under their skins to an extreme degree. They'll start to think Benny Mussolini has risen from the grave. They don't have a lot in the way of sophisticated political talk," Bill said. "They're not—and on penalty of death I wouldn't say this in front of any of them—sophisticated political animals like you and me."

Never heard of dialectics to a man, Botev told Chip Sheen. Such ignorance didn't make them innocent victims in his eyes but rather garden-variety ignoramuses that needed to be put in prison for enormous stretches of their existence until that time that they could come to their senses and start acting like the civilized men that their wives (and even children perhaps) knew them to be. He didn't have sympathy for them simply because they were benighted about politics. Just as he didn't have any sympathy for Joachim Hexall because he seemed so paralyzed by all the information he had at his disposal.

As far as Botev was concerned, all men were obliged to act in a kind and civilized way to each other until acting in a brutal and barbarous way proved more gratifying.

Those members of the Baltimore Mob currently cooling their heels in the Dockworkers Union Hall would obviously beg to differ. Maybe Director Hexall would beg to differ as well if he could ever be roused from his anxiety-induced trance long enough to reflect on the subject. Hexall was not in any way a person worthy of sympathy. He had brought all this misfortune on himself, in Bill's opinion. He should have quit back in 1950 once being made aware of Sidney's plans. He should have had the brains to know what sort of place this was.

Both the mob and the CIA deserved each other as—here was the obvious point to be made—they were both cut from the same cloth. In Botev's understanding of the subject they were vulgar symptoms of late capitalist malaise.

The fact that he was technically a spy for a government agency should have concerned Bill more than it did, given the violent company he now kept. But his contempt for the CIA was so profound he might as well have been on the mob payroll and spying on the spies for all it mattered. Maybe the Crew'd find him out eventually and make him an offer along these lines. He could over time get them information on various overseas agents that they could use to blackmail the federal government. Something like that. This was pure fantasy on his part because he knew the mob soldiers that he dealt with weren't so innovative in their approach to stoolies. They'd simply find him out and shoot him in the face forthwith. Done. End of story. He wouldn't have time even to reveal his proposal to them. Likely they would react to him in a very reflexive way. It would have been unthinkable for them to do business with him. They would have been under the gun if any of them had allowed it to occur.

In this sense they would be very much like the internal operatives of the Central Intelligence Agency who felt the need to uphold a standard of conduct known only to themselves and never applied to those on the outside who they felt were tainted simply by being on the outside.

"Hexall's on the verge of blowing his brains out," Bill told Chip about their mutual acquaintance in a way that

suggested he would be entirely satisfied if this should occur. More than Sidney Gottschalk who he had barely met or Josiah Dorset who he despised only on the basis of secondary reports, Hexall Bill despised the most. He despised him mostly because of the moral weakness that he had admitted to regularly. He was trapped just like Bill Botev. But unlike Bill he had willingly joined the CIA's ranks in the forties, believing it as some type of noble adventure. It would be best for everybody if Joachim Hexall did himself in. Because at that point merely there would be some hope for Bill's being released from CIA bondage. He would be without a handler at least temporarily at that point and maybe he would be forgotten about. He had no real deep contact with the CPUSA anymore anyway. Presently they were trolling around various left-wing targets looking for a nibble. All of this had nothing to do with CIA's mission statement. But they couldn't admit they had made a mistake with him and let him go.

Chip Sheen had a similar backstory to Bill's. In 1951, he had been caught running a high-class call girl service for Washington's hoi-polloi. As punishment he had been bonded to his government for a term that would not exceed the end of his life.

"They've been doing interesting stuff with hypnosis," Chip had told Joachim Hexall during their last meeting when Hexall had demanded a briefing about Chip's activities. Nervous about defying Sidney Gottschalk's implied wish to informationally freeze out his supposed boss, Chip was slightly worried about telling him even this much. The CIA had hired a stage hypnotist who supposedly had perfected the ability of putting people into trance in a few seconds. Sid was trying to perfect ways of hypnotizing people without their consent or knowledge. The idea was to zap them then make them forget that they'd been zapped. After that, supposedly they could be manipulated in any number of ways. They could be hypnotized over the phone for example or with a visual clue that arrived in the mail from a foreign country. There was no limit to the fun here for a creative mind. That is if working techniques could be developed that were reliable outside of the laboratory.

Several of Chip Sheen's "employees" had been volunteered by Dr. Gottschalk to be the stage hypnotist's guinea pigs in this phase of the project. The problem they found—and this Chip could have readily explained to Sidney if he had bothered to ask—was that whores were amongst the last people on the planet that one should use as subjects for testing compliance boundaries. Devoid of either self-esteem or a reliable secondary income, even a "high class" call girl regardless of if they were in trance generally answered yes to every client request. Therefore, it was hard to determine a baseline for them. Sid Gottschalk obviously was not a frequenter of whores. With them, you were not really testing against a solid moral wall. Belatedly Sheen had started recruiting hotel staff and anybody lounging around the lobby to use as subject controls. They were trying to see if these techniques worked on normal people for God-knew what nefarious use later on.

The phrase *high-class prostitute* in Chip Sheen's experience was a contradiction in terms.

"They kicked me out for playing grab ass with one of your willing girls," the previously alluded to stage hypnotist, Martin Hutchinson, said to Chip when seeing him there in the St Regis hotel lobby nursing a neat glass of whiskey like it was the last bit of alcohol on earth. Martin wasn't obviously a heavy drinker. But down here decked out in his velvet stage tuxedo (for some reason) he felt the need to imbibe. He felt it made him less conspicuous by degrees if this was done. He felt he would blend into the somewhat sloshy clientele of this posh lobby if he bent an elbow like all the rest.

The CIA project that Chip Sheen was involved in was ongoing in a variety of rooms on the eighth floor of the prestigious hotel.

Possessor of a thick Brooklyn accent, Martin Hutchinson, who went by the stage name Mr. Mystery, was at first taken for a cab driver upon being interviewed by Joachim Hexall. It didn't jibe with his idea about what a hypnotist was.

"He took a listen to me and said that there's no way I could do what I claimed," Mr. Mystery had told Sheen when they first met. According to Joachim, the Brooklyn

accent would prove too distracting a trait to soothe unsuspecting victims into trance like he imagined it would. Not British enough, not elevated enough to do the trick without chemical aids. Mr. Mystery was also in possession of a slouch, a pot belly, and a receding hairline that caused an alarming glare to be produced from his strangely shiny pate when exposed to direct light. He had smoker's teeth in addition and a distressing (for Joachim) stammer whenever he was aggressively questioned. He was neither physically imposing nor charismatic in the traditional Hollywood understanding of same. An accountant or taxidermist more likely than a man who could bend wills. Hexall met with him for five minutes and told him to beat it. He wasn't interested anymore. He didn't want so much as a demonstration. He was being made a monkey of by Dr. Gottschalk. This was all a Candid Camera type of scenario, he thought. He was being set up and being dared to respond.

The whore Martin had played grab-ass with said he had a menu of tricks she would perform with him written in magic marker on the inside of one thigh.

"All you have to do," she said to him, "is guess which thigh it is and take a peek."

She told him he could kneel in front of everybody and take a peek. She told him go ahead and do it. She'd seen worse than him. She told him there was no shame in begging for sex. She told him she totally believed he could get it another way. She told him that the gorillas in the room with them would understand. She told him there was no use crying over the spilt milk that was your lonely life. Mr. Mystery, you go ahead and do what you have to see to your needs. She told him, furthermore, she would understand if he chickened out and beat it out of the room forthwith.

Surprised as he was that he got the job after that initially terrible interview, Mr. Mystery went right to work regardless. He believed that subterfuge for the CIA was a source of untapped revenue for a profession that had never risen above a third-tier carnival entertainment, one step above freak show geek and one below ventriloquist. He thought he could cultivate a relationship with the Company and eventually he could

get off the road for good. Despite all his self-advertised skill, Mr. Mystery had of late degenerated to playing the sideshows at state fairs and at halftimes of minor league professional basketball games. It was his lack of personal charisma he assumed that had caused this difficulty with the ticket buying public. Just like Director Hexall, the public had certain misapprehensions about hypnosis. Just like him they weren't ready to suspend their disbelief for the requisite amount of time it took to put five or six yokels under so he could commence with his standard show.

Mr. Mystery had separated himself from the pack with his instantaneous induction technique that he had learned when first performing at Coney Island functioning as his own barker.

"It really can be accomplished in less than thirty seconds," he told Chip Sheen when the subject of technique was first broached with him. Not that Chip Sheen was in any position to carp after technique once he volunteered three of his girls for the first round of experiments. For all the say he had they might as well have taken a sledgehammer to each whore's beehive coiffed cranium and called whatever loopy state they were cast into a hypnotic trance.

Chip Sheen understood the politics of coercion, as he was in a more civilized way than the CIA a master of coercion himself. He was a white pimp of Irish extraction who favored the wearing of paisley ascots dipped in cologne and occasionally white velveteen gloves. A moke's view of classiness, in other words. This was why he and Mr. Mystery got on as famously as they had. They understood each other at a deep level. They each held a socioeconomic grudge against the sort of Skull-and-Bones Society members the CIA recruited from exclusively believing them to be ultimately more trustworthy than, say, the progeny of fishmongers from the Lower East Side.

According to Mr. Mystery, the idea was to catch them by surprise so that they would not know how to react to what you were doing to them. From there on in the mind opened like the shell of a clam once its abductor muscle was cut.

“They stare at you with a lost expression waiting to be told what to do,” he said to Chip. “Nothing to it really. There’s no technique involved at all. It’s a gypsy street technique really. They get caught out between ideas and it’s good night Charlie. You wake them up and they don’t think they’ve ever been zonked at all. They don’t remember where they’ve been for the past few minutes, but they don’t believe they’ve been asleep.”

You can get girls by playing it this way, Mr. Mystery told Chip. But, then again, you could wind up getting your ass beat just as easily if a husband caught you talking to his wife and put two and two together.

“Nowadays I don’t mess around with no married dames,” Mystery said to Chip once another tenth of an ounce of whiskey had been brushed on his lips and a greasy forelock removed from his line of sight. “Out in Dubuque I learned my lesson the hard way with the club owner’s wife. They want to fuck and suck to beat the band, the ordinary everyday housewife. But if you do, you’re always on the lookout for what’s coming at you over your shoulder. The husband sees the pocket watch come out and there’s nothing you can do to calm them down. You can’t tell them it’s all in the broad’s imagination. You can’t tell them that it’s she that wanted this or else she wouldn’t be here right where she is. She’s staring out into space with these spacy eyes waiting to be given a command.”

Mr. Mystery was strongly considering trading this version of himself in after the CIA was through with it for a life of spiritual contemplation. He had over the last month and a half steadily been accruing correspondence from a monastery in northern Quebec. He wanted to cleanse himself of the detritus of his present life. He had sinned egregiously against the Lord of lords. It had all come to him over the past few months that he needed to get right with God Almighty. But he didn’t believe it would happen for him over the course of an afternoon. There was too much pussy available in this line of work to simply walk away from. Sin was like the barnacles of a ship that accrued on the soul’s exterior over decades. It required a massive amount of effort to completely remove. Could be years, decades even before he finally

could consider himself clean. Well, this was all his fault he realized. He wasn't looking to further pillory the Central Intelligence Agency. Each case officer had a final judgment awaiting him. Eventually he would have to stand naked and explain his actions. He didn't see a given case officer's exploits as having much to do with his own spiritual health. The officers' influence would have to be sloughed off so he could start his cleansing journey. He saw them as temporary impediments. Unlike Chip Sheen he had no real axe to grind with them.

Over the past few days Mr. Mystery had stopped hypnotizing the women. The CIA officers had wanted to learn the techniques themselves. Presently they wanted him around merely as an advisor. He would walk into a given room and wait around for a type of difficulty that required his expertise. After twenty minutes he would split for the lobby and remain there until he saw most of the participants leave. They were daily drawing their own conclusions about the efficacy of hypnosis in their work (whatever that might entail). He had been reduced to a fifth wheel by now. He had nothing to do and would have asked to leave if he could have squirrelled up the courage to leave. But regardless of how irrelevant he became to them, he couldn't squirrel up the courage. He needed to hypnotize himself into gaining some courage. But somehow this skill proved elusive to Mr. Mystery.

In his lapel pocket Chip Sheen had a monogrammed cigarette case with gold leaf on its exterior.

"Who's up there now, anyway?" he asked Mr. Mystery. He was trying to calibrate his own behavior to the answer that came. Like Mr. Mystery, Chip didn't have a role to play anymore. He had been directed to keep quiet and slap the girls into compliance if one of them had gotten upset about what was taking place. Presently Chip was trying to figure out how long he could linger down here before he made an appearance in one of the suites.

Dr. Gottschalk seldom visited field operations any longer. Nowadays he tended to administer his fillips remotely with a nasty piece of correspondence. He was not an especially direct person which made his threats when they came truly alarming. He generally didn't

confront. He connived. Oftentimes he would be missing from the sessions entirely which was a relief to all parties concerned. The whores themselves considered Dr. Gottschalk a major creep. He hadn't done anything to them as far as Chip could see but a practiced whore possessed an intuition about men.

Chip was bound to make an appearance if Gottschalk was present. The charge of operating a bawdy house that they had threatened him with originally was still hanging over his head. They wouldn't let him go until he had fulfilled his purpose as they saw it. They didn't have a high regard for the men that they turned. Chip Sheen was a trafficker in illicit thrills. In their eyes he should have considered himself lucky to have avoided jail.

Obviously, Chip Sheen thought different. He would argue vociferously that the act of love — even if one party involved in it was ruminatively compensated — was entirely removed from the public interest.

He thought it was a self-evident statement. He thought any right-thinking American if they had the ability to remove themselves from the bruiting of various self-interested opinion makers would support the contention without equivocation and in perpetuity.

"I'm an American just like you, a businessman just like many here, a lover of life at rock bottom who sees many roads that lead up to virtue's golden palace in the mist-stained distance," Chip Sheen said to an especially ruddy faced Senator Joseph R. McCarthy when having encountered him in the St. Regis elevator on the way up to the hypnosis suite. Supporting himself on one iconic pine panel in the ornate car, Wisconsin's junior senator was not in any position to know exactly to whom Sheen was talking. Of course, they were the only two in the elevator at the moment. But Senator McCarthy would not have known that. His face was turned toward one wall and his eyelids were three-quarters of the way closed and the same color as his pallid tongue that lolled from his opened mouth like a German Shepherd's on an intemperate day.

He was drunk off his ass (not to put an exceedingly fine point on it). Or worse. Chip didn't know whether Joe was a drug user. Joe seemed in no mood to discuss the

matter further. He was, as the Victorian euphemism ran, indisposed. He had great notions of how this country should be governed, what should be encouraged, and what should be proscribed by force. After all, some men were born for greatness and others had it foisted upon them as a side effect of aristocracy. His quest for truth had always been secondary to winning the Manichean struggle that had only recently been termed the Cold War. Primarily Senator McCarthy's goal had been to give those to the manor born their rightful comeuppance, to put them in their place so to speak via inquiring about their real sympathy towards the American cause. The Communist infiltration in his mind had always been mere political subterfuge, simply an expedient way of drilling down to the real and necessary confrontation in American society between the politically privileged and the politically deprived, between those know-it-alls with ambitions far beyond what the Constitution allowed and those innocents who would be driven before them, mere faceless cattle to these ideologues and war-criminals-in-waiting. Joe McCarthy was a regular guy who in the late 1940s had grown tired about the government turning a blind eye to the Communist infiltration of many unions in the Midwest and set out to do something about it. Let them raise a fuss about their rights he thought once various movers and shakers were identified as subversive. Because as far as he was concerned the work of his House Un-American Activities Committee would move forward. He saw nothing upsetting to the overall political climate regarding the work he was in the midst of completing.

The Committee's activities were principally informational. Once responding to a house subpoena a man could choose to invoke his Fifth Amendment rights or not. The senator assumed that ordinary Joes would have nothing to hide. He assumed that those real union men who had seen their organizations taken out from underneath them would be eager to tell their tales in an open forum. Nobody as far as the senator could see was being scapegoated. No so-called blacklist existed. At least not in Washington proper for those that chose not to cooperate.

Hard to say why Senator McCarthy had been given such a tough time of late by the Ed Murrows of the world, but the obvious conclusion was that the various television and radio networks were rife with Communist infiltration. They were primed for an FBI investigation concerning the same.

“I’ve had interesting dreams of late,” the senator said to no one at all who was there in the elevator with him now. He asked Chip Sheen for a handkerchief. Something about the sweat pouring out of him was unappealingly toxic of late. The sweat was laced with impurities as befitted somebody whose liver function was shutting down. The senator needed to be free of it momentarily. He needed to be free of the drip drip drip from forehead to nose to mouth. He was not now nor ever would be a prime physical specimen. But he needed to be relieved of the suspicion that poison was running through him. He was sure to die soon if he wasn’t granted some relief. He needed to mop his forehead if only that his eyes could open all the way and he could find the hospital. He needed a momentary bit of physical relief. If he survived, he could figure out what he should do next.

Strange that Joe was here in the St. Regis when all this anti-Communist legerdemain was ongoing. But, on the other hand, maybe the senator had been brought in unbeknownst to Chip to lend his prosecutorial expertise to the entire project.

“I’m a lamb in sheep’s clothing,” Senator McCarthy told his imaginary interlocutor a split second after Chip, against his better judgment, handed him the polka-dot kerchief. If Gottschalk was there and asked him about the handkerchief’s whereabouts, he could always produce it later and hold up the slightly stained effluence on it as proof that he was telling the truth.

Maybe there was an entire intra-government anti-Communist star chamber type set up of whom Senator McCarthy was only the most visible member. The thought of such an entity created a warm feeling for Chip. As his greatest fear was being on a legal archipelago because of his participation in project MKULTRA. He didn’t want to be isolated to such an

extent that he could be easily scapegoated when this project was discovered. The hypothesis of a pervasive Washington involvement gave him hope that this was the true hidden thrust of government. He would not even be worth investigating let alone prosecuting by whatever truth commission emerged in the ruins of American democracy later. His name would be expunged from the public record due to irrelevance and he could return to his former life, drinking, bitch-slapping, and huffing from the odd ether rag that came his way due to the auspices of a grateful client or a cringing whore who knew what was good for her and how to avoid further complication in her life.

Chip Sheen hoped he would be safe. But surely Sen. McCarthy would not be amongst this invisible crusade's membership any longer given the physical travails he was undergoing at the moment.

"He looked exactly like my father did just before he met his Maker," Chip said to one of his whores, Ruth De Leon, once out of the elevator when spying her in the eighth-floor hallway smoking a cigarette in her slip.

According to Chip Sheen, what happened when you're in the midst of end stage liver failure was that you started sweating uncontrollably and had spontaneous hallucinations that did not in their texture differ from ordinary perception. To this extent it mirrored the hypnotic effects Sidney Gottschalk was trying to achieve. It was a coincidence that Dr. Gottschalk himself would have noticed immediately if he had been in the elevator with Joe McCarthy. It might have given him no end of ideas about how to proceed.

"I have to attribute all of this, the whole thing, to a kind of giant coincidence of the sort that seldom happened," Chip Sheen said to Ruth. By now she was sitting on the hallway floor trying to find a discreet place to toss her ash. Over time she had learned to tune out Chip's whimsical digressions.

"What's with the duds?" she asked Chip while staring at the pinstripe suit with its override lapels. Like maybe he was en route to audition for the role of Sky Masterson in an upcoming local production of *Guys and Dolls*. For Chip, such an outfit was simultaneously too high class

and low class at once. He wasn't the business type. Nor was he was the sort to be caught without his perfumed paisley ascot. He had a cigarette holder in one pocket of his jacket that he was reluctant to remove fearing that it clashed with the ensemble. He had a notion of himself as a pure victim in this affair despite his immoral vocation. He would make this clear to Joachim Hexall and his ilk. He would damn well wear whatever he wanted. He would tell this to Dr. Gottschalk if required to.

The hotel's front desk receptionist was inside the room. The case officers had lured her up here under false pretenses. Also, there was another man, a recent hotel guest that one of the officers inside had asked for a cigarette. They backed him against the wall, and they went to town on him. They used the techniques Mr. Mystery had taught them. Hypnosis wasn't so hard. That is, if you possessed the requisite brazenness to go through with it. The CIA officers certainly were brazen owing that they were essentially immune to all manner of US law and packing heat to boot.

Despite their best efforts, they couldn't seem to get the man to remain in trance long enough to be able to launch a proper interrogation of who he was and why he was lounging around the hotel in the manner that they observed him doing.

"He's not from around here they tell me," Ruth told Chip. Apparently, these methods worked better on some nationalities than others. Your average kraut, for example, it worked well on. This was owing to his predilection for submission to an authoritarian personality. Your average Irishman it didn't work at all on. As all the booze had likely long ago hardened his brain to the point that he would have trouble following directions on a dare let alone while in trance when his higher faculties were far away.

The case officers thought it was all attributable to this, that there was some cultural disconnect that they were not anticipating that made it impossible for them to break through to the man's unconscious.

"They're saying they're doing everything right, that it's his fault not theirs," Ruth said to her pimp who frankly had not cared one iota about the efficacy of

project MKULTRA. Understandably, Chip Sheen was more concerned with slipping out from under their thumb than any real progress they had made in creating an army of robot slaves or whatever it was their ultimate objective was. Of course these were not mutually exclusive goals. Chip assumed the further along they were in developing these procedures, the closer he was to being rid of them forever. They weren't nice people to be around, especially Sidney Gottschalk. Chip wanted to ask his whore if she had seen Gottschalk wandering around lately. He had wanted to collect himself as much as he could before having to face him. Sidney Gottschalk seemed so devoid of compassion toward his fellow men that he might as well have been another species. At first blush he did not look like somebody who had been charged with saving humanity from itself.

Gottschalk was not a benign knight of democracy. This was in Sheen's admittedly unsophisticated assessment. Nor was he much of a project manager given his results thus far.

"You got the key, doll," Chip told Ruth and waited for the key's plastic chain to grease his suddenly sweaty palm. He wanted to get this over with and begin whatever fight he needed to begin. He knew he'd have to fight to be free of these monsters for all time. He was expected inside forthwith. He didn't want to be accused of being a malingerer. He never thought of himself as a malingerer despite his criminal background. He certainly didn't want to defend himself from ludicrous charges lodged by men who by rights ought to have been in prison themselves.

Once inside, Chip Sheen placed his pinstriped shoulders squarely against the suite's plaster walls, reasoning that nobody could sneak up on him that way. Also, it removed him from the center of attention. Presently this was just off the couch at the far side of the room.

A man was sitting there in a porkpie hat with his pants around his ankles. A woman Chip had never seen before was three feet away from him down on her knees and staring off into space. Every so often she would stand up and make a movement to the left or the right

then kneel back down. There were two men in black suits leaning against the far wall smoking cigarettes. They didn't look particularly enthralled about what was taking place. It seemed they had seen this pantomime play out before. They didn't act like anything was taking place that hadn't seen many times before.

Soon Chip Sheen came up to one of them and asked for a cigarette.

"Where's your handkerchief?" the man said to one. "The one with the clashing pattern?"

Stuffed in his trouser pocket as it was dewy with Senator McCarthy's effluence, he had been reluctant to show it off.

"Give it to me anyhow," the man said ignoring the slight reek that came with it once newly emerged from its hiding place. He walked over to the woman and shoved the handkerchief into her mouth. Then he pointed a finger at the man in the porkpie pie.

Something was supposed to happen next that would either prove or disprove the hypothesis being tested. Chip Sheen wanted to know where Dr. Gottschalk was, but both men admitted no knowledge of him.

"Let's have some fun," one of them said to the other and told Chip Sheen to get the fuck out. Chip had his cigarette holder out by this point newly exposed to the suite's gray air. He didn't have to be told twice to leave.

Unnatural Vices (May 2005)

I.

Despite their victim's wish to be executed by firing squad as, at least in his eccentric mind, would have befitted a duly elected head of state, the Shi'a mob had tied a rope around Saddam Hussein's hairy neck. Then they opened the trap door underneath his feet and let gravity hold sway.

"In the end nobody's dignity survived intact," said prophet-without-honor Abraham Minkowski to Marta Trask of the video-graphed scene while meeting her for tea at an Upper West Side Starbucks a week after it occurred. As directed by the Shi'as' American handlers, Saddam's execution was supposed to be a solemn affair. It was intended to have civic-religious overtones, a sacrifice unto the middling God of democracy.

Rather, what had emerged was fodder for a nasty little snuff film (minus the usual corpse fucking at the end) that was produced as a video document of the historical moment. They dragged poor Saddam onto makeshift gallows and held his head still to fit the noose around him.

They cursed his name and his father's name. Then they set the trap door free from its hinge with a pointed stick. They sang a song and that was it for a while. They left the body swinging there in the dim interior room where it had taken place. Inexplicably, the camera had been left to run.

By the time the YouTube video ended, Saddam was still there hanging by his broken neck. If you didn't know who he was you would have felt sorry for him. You would

have watched this video and felt a great evil had been committed against him. This was not how civilized societies enacted justice. This was rather, a tribal display of vengeance-seeking. Nobody could look at this video and pronounce the supposedly liberated nation of Iraq safe for democracy.

In the end even the desert rats that were filmed scurrying around the gallows' edge seemed vaguely offended by the display. As if they suddenly had to shoulder some manner of dignity that had been abandoned by their human tormentors.

They demurred, for example, attacking the offal dripping from Saddam's right pant leg (because of his rectum's post-mortem dilation). They needed to repaint the veneer of respectability that was missing from the proceedings. Perhaps some less than uplifting biological imperative was at play in their hesitancy. There were men still in the room likely somewhere off-camera. So, they felt the need to keep to the shadows. Or, maybe, they were too well-fed on a moveable feast of war-generated carrion. They didn't like the food being presented to them now. They could take it or leave for something tastier..

Dressed in his prophet's sackcloth robe, Abe Minkowski had watched the whole thing while in the relative safety of the new Apple store on Columbus Circle away from the disruptive patrols of the NYPD with their new stop-and-frisk policies, whose entire purpose had been to harass undesirables to the point that they would leave the city. The politicians who had put the cops up to it were covetous of the new New York, with its plummeting crime rate and its ascendant real estate market. They had no plans to accommodate the needs and rights of a lunatic/eccentric simply because he was, in a purely technical sense, human. Ten seconds out of the Apple store, Abe would have to take it in on the lam through the park's narrow paths if he had wished to make it back to his pad (wherever that was) unscathed. The NYPD were far more protective of the area's businesses than they were its verdant spaces. Deadbeat lunatics like Abe Minkowski could be counted on to harass passing tourists more reliably than any horse

drawn carriage operator could while making its way from one part of the park to another at four mph. The powers-that-be in this town frowned upon panhandlers bigtime. Even a man like Abe who had never asked for a handout in his life was frowned upon simply because he looked and smelled like a bum.

Ask yourself: what happens to a prophet after his prophecy is fulfilled? Presently it seemed Abe Minkowski was in dire need of job retraining. He didn't feel himself to be psychologically damaged in any way despite opinions to the contrary. He felt rather entirely well-suited to his new role of Manhattan gadfly. He would risk arrest and simple bullying by New York's power structure in order to start a conversation with a stranger. He was deeply nervous about the progress of society and the war. If they wanted to arrest him, he knew they would have to eventually either arraign him or let him go. To be arraigned under the current regime meant that some violation of written law would have to be alleged and evidence presented. He knew his rights. He knew that the average cop couldn't do what they constantly threatened that they would do if their edicts weren't obeyed to the letter. Which was to ship Abe's ass to the nearest mental institution and leave him there to rot.

"They got everything on camera that they wanted to," Abe said of the YouTube video's creators, and palpated a lump behind his left ear. He woke up with the lump one day ago. He couldn't say what it actually signified. Momentarily he suspected it was cancer. He couldn't say if this was the case or not.

Objective historians would look on that video's content and even its production values, Abe felt, and detect the death knell for true democratic reform in the Land of the Sun. From that point forward Iraq would transition into something else all too familiar in that part of the world.

"The Shi'as are out for blood," Abe told Marta Trask in a matter-of-fact way. It might be true. But, then again, he wasn't in possession of the basic political information to say for sure. He had only been following the war itself for a little over four months. In fact, he had only known about the Sunni-Shi'a schism for a few weeks ever since

finding the Columbus Circle Apple Store and realizing that he could browse there all he wanted without fear of retribution from prevailing authority.

At various branches of the New York Public Library by contrast, you needed to sign in and present identification to access the internet. Which of course eliminated any theoretical claim you had to privacy well before a keystroke was lodged.

“They have filters on all the computers that restrict your access to any sort of true search,” Abe had said to Marta during the meeting before last. It had taken place on the same park bench they were sitting on now. It was in Central Park nearest to the so-called Strawberry Fields which was a place John Lennon may have liked to come when he was alive but only had relevance for Marta because it was where she and Abe first met. She had completely ignored the vision he had insisted she internalize upon their first encounter. She didn’t mourn for the dead of 9/11 anymore than she mourned for the hangnail she had discarded the hour before she sought out her suede jacket from the hall closet in preparation for her daily Central Park walk. Such destruction and excision as she saw it was mere celestial shop keeping, a dispassionate recycling of existing material for no higher purpose. If there was no higher purpose to life (which most civilized people could agree was the case) then life’s end was nothing to grow dewy-eyed over. There was no meaning to it, let alone tragedy. If anything, it was a relief that life was as short as it was. Usually there was so much unhappiness associated with being alive that Marta Trask wondered why others hadn’t reached a similar conclusion. She didn’t think the dead benefited from our tears. To her tears were like hangnails. Once removed, they left a gap, a wound. The idea was to put a bandage in place quickly and forget the circumstances of the injury. Marta Trask didn’t see the point of remembering that which was gone for good. The dead are dead and cease to have names, let alone memories. Crying over a corpse was like crying over a half pound of sliced corned beef at a delicatessen. Everything that was alive had a mother once realize. It only added to human

misery to dwell on death so long that you began to establish a cult around it.

She thought it was a self-evident proposition. When John Lennon died in 1979, Marta was annoyed at the crowds that had greeted her in front of the Dakota co-op on her walks to the park. None of these people likely had known John Lennon personally. But their grief and desire to mourn was unabated because of it. She didn't understand how this could be. There was a derangement to the desire to rekindle memories that a person never possessed. Surely, mourners must have been aware of the lunacy inherent in their acts. But they couldn't help themselves. For some reason. Maybe they were merely dumb or like Abe Minkowski willful eccentrics who simply could not resist acting on their impulses. Perhaps possessing a modicum of psychological hygiene should be a mandatory requirement prior to being granted a driver's license. Just like possessing a certain level of accurate vision was. Civil libertarians would protest this prohibition of course but some sort of control over the lunatics of the world was required. Nowadays Marta's fellow New Yorkers scared her. They weren't so well adjusted to the awful truth like she was. They had bizarre waking dreams, persistent visions involving their own cosmological importance that did not jibe with the findings of science. For them, 9/11 was proof of the hand of God, not a refutation of it. There was no arguing with such people. She thought they all should be locked away.

So it was, Marta recalled, that the talk about the filters on the public library's computers had been initiated by Abe on several occasions. But until now she had not taken notice of it. Suddenly in the face of her newly discovered balefulness it had taken on added meaning. Marta thought somehow it had something to do with her. She thought it was linked to her own mortality as if she was an webpage manifest in cyberspace and in the process of being caught up in a search engine filter.

"These fascists have gone too far this time," Marta told Abe, speaking not of the Shi'a lynch mob that had just finished being described to her. Rather, she was speaking of the ongoing retraction of civil liberties

doubling as the War on Terror. No offense to Saddam (and his heinous progeny still on the lam according to reputable news sources), but there was no real outrage to be generated by his fate. He got what he deserved but not necessarily in the gilded style that might well have been fructifying for a nascent democracy. The former dictator of Iraq was no martyr for any cause that either he or his Baathist followers could articulate. Only the Shi'as' American handlers really viewed any of this with real dread but Marta knew they were long past due to be disillusioned. The violent mess that was Iraq was an American creation. These war planners needed to be bullied into accepting the commonly accepted notion that a true Iraqi democracy was as illusory as a morally engaged God. The lynching of Saddam was only the first step in an entire series of disabuse. Its final product would be a change in government if not policy in the United States. Which in Marta Trask's view was neither good nor bad. She didn't think any politician would be persuaded to listen to reason until the safety on the gun that was pointed at their heads was released and a count of three began.

Marta's view held that everything was getting worse and for all the wrong reasons. As far as the public libraries went it was mildly difficult for her to believe any of them were even still open.

"I wonder how they spend their days," she said to Abe speaking of the librarians who worked there. Likely they stared off into space for two hour stretches until there was something to do. It was hard to say how few people read books nowadays, though she supposed the information was readily available somewhere on the internet as a type of multicolored burn down chart whose meaning would be largely apprehend-able to those who had never read a word of English. This was the gradual way a post-literate society had tried to accommodate its need to communicate information. Soon there would be no need for the written word at all. Rather, pictograms of the kind found on cave walls would likely make a comeback. They would be sold as a type of avant-garde communication. By that point Marta Trask would have been long dead lying beside her little dog Goethe in the

quiet and accommodating earth forever. Just as well, she thought, as the gift of literacy had done little to civilize humanity. Eventually the information—both technical and moral—encoded in the written word would be forgotten too and civilization would be no more. This by itself according to Marta would hardly be a cause for despair. Nobody least of all her enjoyed civilization's rules. The younger version of Marta would be just as happy constantly pregnant and barefooted in some hut in the woods as employed a bigtime publishing house. She thought this great unravelling would happen rather quickly. By then most people would have sunk so far into the tar pit of illiteracy that it wouldn't have occurred to them to protest the change. It simply would be looked upon as a natural event. In very few places would the death of elevating culture be contemplated.

If she had been in the room with Saddam, Marta Trask would have advised him not to struggle so much and risk a botched hanging wherein the trapdoor would have to be reset once more.

"Judging by their mood," Abe told her of the Shi'a mob, "I don't think they would even bother with the formality."

Rather what would likely have occurred was that they would have grabbed en masse at the Iraqi president's still twitching body and torn him into bite-sized morsels. Abe was slightly surprised that they hadn't resorted to this strategy in the first place. At least the construction of gallows suggested aforethought which further suggested some attention to detail (which further suggested the adherence to some pre-defined procedure or set of procedures that mobs were famously not noted for). This all suggested to Abe some coercion by the American advisors in Iraq. In America, the application of the death penalty had come to be seen as a religious rite rather than a bit of race-inspired revenge. Low savages murdered capriciously after all wherein civilized technocrats arranged executions of various undesirables tinseled with enough religious falderal to rationalize it as a truly moral exercise. The clergyman was right beside the prison warden in American-style executions whenever the mechanism of death was

activated. All democracies called for these make-believe rituals to perpetuate the illusion that a given society was always better than the treatment of its lowest scum. Harping on this idea incessantly, nevertheless it had fallen on deaf ears by the ruling Shi'as. Likely because in Shi'a culture all ritual was reserved for religious practice. For them, government was where tax revenues were pooled and distributed, where the police apparatus was constructed and so on. There was nothing sacred about it in their view. There was nothing within its dictates that encouraged a true emotional response in a man of the true faith, Allah's slave, who realized all judgment was reserved for Him alone.

Just before the trapdoor opened, Saddam Hussein had uttered a Muslim prayer according to Abe. Though it might have been a curse for all he knew about the subject. He knew no Arabic. And besides the microphone on the camera was malfunctioning. It emitted a type of static hiss occasionally masking any string of words that may have been uttered. But in Abe Minkowski's myth making imagination, it was a prayer. He wanted to believe that it was. He wanted Saddam to have gained spiritual knowledge from his travails at the hands of the Americans and Shi'as. Per a Hollywood script, he wanted a late third act revelation to descend on this drama's protagonist. Such an epiphany would correspond to no real documented mode of normal human psychology, but he wanted it to descend regardless. He assumed this was the way it worked. His perceptions had been constrained by the products of the mainstream culture. He was sure that the God of Islam had come to Saddam in his final moments to validate all that had taken place in the moments before his death. Because it would have all been a lurid waste if it was otherwise. People died for no reason all the time but in this case, the death would seem especially gratuitous. Reflexively Minkowski pushed against that interpretation. Even porn mp4s were replete with happy endings! Merely, happiness was what the audience called for between car chases.

Marta Trask wondered if such Hollywood epiphanies weren't known by the Shia executioners.

“They learned so many things and have come so far,” she said to Abe and not for the first time today felt for the presence of Goethe’s leash in her right hand. “They seem like such good people,” she said. “They have a monopoly on God’s true intentions so they must be good. Why shouldn’t they be the heroes in their own drama? They are the protagonists. They would be the ones to evolve. They had served God admirably after all. They were faithful and brutal. They were perfect servants of God.”

Just because somebody was murdered, she told Abe, a martyr wasn’t made automatically. After all, how many poor storm troopers did Luke Skywalker and Han Solo kill on the way to destroying the Death Star? And what about the Death Star’s destruction itself? How many innocent thousands died in that conflagration? An act of mass murder! But nobody recited the Kaddish for them.

“You never know about motives in wartime, dum-dum,” Marta said to Abe Minkowski recalling for herself the time when a type of Star Wars children books tie-in was launched through the auspices of Lafayette Publishing’s brand (whose auspices she had mercifully freed herself of as of last week). The proposal that she had been given called for an explication of a young Anniken Skywalker up to age nine. She hadn’t understood then as now the drama behind the symbolism. She couldn’t see that any George Lucas character was in possession of a true psychology let alone the ability to experience epiphany. They were all medieval types to her. To her, they were symptoms of an age progressively turning its back on modern thought with its relativistic accounting of moral discourse and its need to explain evil away altogether. People wanted to believe in pure evil nowadays. They were tired of the modern world. They wanted the candles to be blown out.

Darth Vader/Anniken Skywalker. Marta Trask knew enough about the Star Wars mythology to recall him as a fallen character. He’s fallen because he married a woman and was cast out. As far as he was concerned up until the moment they placed the mask over his face he was nobody’s villain. He was always a knight errant simply waiting for events to prove him out.

The camera likely had never caught the expressions of wonderment and gratitude coming across the faces of the mob when Saddam Hussein began to swing. Maybe it had but for obvious reasons a viewer's attention was otherwise diverted. Saddam's neck was forced askew by the noose's insistent upward pull. Marta thought it behooved Abe Minkowski to travel back to the Apple store at some point and have a further look at the video. She wanted to know exactly what there was to see regarding who had gained enlightenment and who was merely befuddled by the entire display.

"In my personal opinion," Marta said to him, "the less we think of ourselves as the heroes of our personal dramas, the greater our chances of survival become."

She wasn't convinced of this bromide but she said it anyway. She said it because it was hard to tolerate Abe Minkowski and his wonderment at the Shi'a video's casual nihilism. Nothing was learned from it. No life lesson was conferred even in a brutish way. To Marta Trask it all went without saying. Despite his superficial eccentricity, Abe Minkowski was still naïve enough to expect a life lesson in the sexless pornography that he consumed courtesy of the Apple Corporation.

According to Marta Trask, Abe Minkowski was not even a real person but merely some invention of hers, an external projection of her own imagination of disaster. Or rather a symptom of her own burgeoning mental incapacity that within two years would lead to her internment in the still operating Greystone Mental Hospital across the river in bucolic New Jersey. It was a place she always felt she was bound for. She had never mourned for the dead of 9/11, for example. This was because they had never mourned for her. Now they were gone and she would soon follow them. Presently she didn't see any of this as tragedy. She felt it was inevitable, just like the vengeance of the Shi'a mob. There was no need to recoil in horror over it.

Marta was not a schizophrenic, but rather some sort of dementia sufferer in the initial stages of her disease. Of course, she knew Abe wasn't there "in reality." Over time the entire concept of reality had grown threadbare for her. Eventually she would discard it completely and

then she would be truly mad. Up until the very end she would think that she was in control. She would assume all her hallucinations and visions were real.

She hoped insanity was an entirely reversible condition. She didn't know if this was the case, but she still held out hope that it might be. She thought it would be interesting to discover the truth. It would be a sort of science experiment for her. It would be just like in high school biology class where a dead frog was brought in, and she began to find out.

If you asked Marta Trask after the meaning of Abe Minkowski's sudden presence in her life, she would tell you it was because she was dealing with the stress of unemployment as well as the death of Goethe in progressive and painful stages.

"The week I met you," she said to Abe, "is when I first received his diagnosis. Cancer of the bones according to the vet. I asked after the possibility of a bone marrow transplant for him, but they didn't offer the procedure in New York. I said where then. She said I'll check for you but never returned my calls."

Marta had a cigarette somewhere on her person that she wanted to smoke. But the task of having to dig after it overwhelmed her initial desire for it.

"There was a standard course of chemotherapy they offered in the form of pills," she said continuing the story. "They didn't care," she said. "The vet didn't care. Six months later Goethe was dead. But here I am still talking to you like it was the first time I walked him in the park."

Marta supposed that what Minkowski was meant to represent to her was a connectedness to other people and creatures that she was completely incapable of attaining presently by herself nowadays.

"Something's dead inside me," she said to Abe checking to see if anybody around them was paying attention to her long enough to quit with their jabbering. She didn't want to risk a confrontation with one of these goody-two-shoes so prevalent in New York nowadays. She didn't want to have to explain herself in any defensive way to somebody who by lights should have

been minding his or her goddamn business in the first place.

She wasn't crazy yet. And she knew she wasn't crazy. So it was outrageous really to have to deny that there was any sort of real person in front of her at the moment. Passersby would ask for Abe Minkowski's approximate dimensions. They would feign concern for her and silently skulk off to fetch the police. The goddamn police! By then she would be long gone anyway down the nearest subway entrance.

The cops would find her and accuse her of being crazy. She would look at the cops and accuse them of being crazy right back.

"I was just minding my fucking business," she would scream at them and then recall a scene where she was being accosted by passersby. It would be a standoff at the worst which was good enough for her. She would threaten to sue and that would be that. She would do some skulking of her own and find where these nosy cunts lived and do with them as she saw fit. She had no intention of taking crap from people who understood almost nothing of the way the world worked. They were the ones who belonged under twenty-four-hour surveillance as far as she was concerned. But she had the common decency to keep her opinions to herself. She didn't see that it was asking too much to do this. She didn't see that there was any horrible burden placed upon a person just because she wished them to mind their own fucking business for a change.

Indeed, something had died inside Marta Trask, some tenuous link to other human beings had stopped functioning around the summer of 2004. She had been let go from Lafayette Publishing months before due to a screaming match she had with Mr. Krantz about the lack of real milk in the refrigerator for coffee. Nowadays employees either had to bring their own milk or make do with the powdered dreck that had been placed on the small kitchen counter years ago seemingly. Poured into one's coffee mug the powder barely dissolved, stale as it was. It drifted down to the mug's ceramic bottom as a type of tasteless sediment. After years of complaining about it, Marta hadn't understood why some sort of

ameliorative action wasn't taken. After all, a quart of half and half cost less than six dollars, if bought at the local Duane Reade. She had assumed this would have been taken care of already if only to shut her up. Probably Krantz had long since hardened himself against these complaints and had secretly given the order not to buy milk. If Marta wanted milk or half and half for that matter, she could buy it herself.

Of course, she could! But to her the expense had never been the point. Companies were supposed to do for their employees, to take care of them like in the old days. Krantz' father had hired Marta decades back and he had always taken care of his employees. The son was a corrupted version of the father in her view. He had no respect for the publishing industry, let alone the drones who labored in it daily to make their rent. To him human beings were mere lines on a spreadsheet, so many replaceable parts. Really, Krantz was the worst sort of person imaginable. And this insight when expressed was the preamble to her tirade. She wanted to get so many things straight with him before leaving. She had assumed that she would be let go anyway soon enough and she wanted to unburden herself before that happened. For the past few months, she had been searching for a pretext. When she saw the remains of the non-dairy creamer resting on top of the garbage in the kitchen like some sort of upturned buoy she saw her opportunity. The non-dairy creamer was at the very least a conversation starter. And she had wanted a definitive answer about the lack of milk.

"I tried to be as lighthearted with this twerp as possible," she said to Abe Minkowski about her encounter with Krantz the younger. Well, not really. As thirty seconds after she had entered his office Krantz was staring over her shoulder wondering after the possibility of fetching security. There was no security internal to Lafayette Publishing of course as even the firm's long time doty receptionist, Gladys Millstein, had been given her walking papers long ago. He would have to call down to the building's lobby and wait for one of the rent-a-cops to show up. Likely all they would do was call the real cops on the firm's behalf. It wasn't part of

their contract likely to see to out-of-control employees. Merely, their function was to shepherd visitors in and out of the metal detectors that everybody was forced to walk through as of 2002. That's the price one paid for relentless downsizing, Mr. Krantz might have supposed, had he been an even marginally reflective executive. Instead, he thought of nothing more than the annoyance that the situation was causing him now. People needed to do their jobs in an exceptional way without every detail having to be bashed out in advance. Krantz thought of himself as one of these exceptional performers. He compared himself frequently to Ayn Rand's John Galt. He was of that class that had never encountered any serious challenge in life. Greased by daddy's money, people kept saying yes to him. So, he had come to see himself as somebody worthy of his station.

Yet he wasn't so oblivious as to not see the way Marta's jaw protruded slightly resultant from clenched teeth as she entered through his office's double doors. Also perceived were the clenched fists held at her side as if she was making ready to throw a punch. In the back of his mind Krantz had been anticipating this moment for years. It had been a mistake to have kept her on for so many years past a rational company need. They were afraid of an age discrimination lawsuit. Also, they assumed at some point Narta would grow tired of being marginalized in the company and simply resign on her own. Her blackballing was an on-going concern with all Lafayette managers. They assumed she would have initiated a showdown with Krantz the Younger years ago where a buyout package could be discussed.

To judge by her body language at this meeting, Krantz knew she wasn't about to request a buyout package.

"I have no idea about our dairy requirements for this year," Krantz told her before mentioning that he took his coffee black.

The repeated requests for milk or half and half in the fridge over so many years had obviously not made much of an impression with him. Merely they had hardened his

heart to the point that he had declared Lafayette Publishing a dairy-free zone in perpetuity.

Krantz assumed so many of Marta's coworkers had been directed to avoid her like the plague by somebody other than himself. Nothing out of the ordinary had occurred today as far as he knew. So maybe this was the crescendo: the mad scene of a moribund Ophelia at last having found its way to center stage.

Vaguely he wished he had bought a gun for just in case. He had no intention of killing Marta Trask. He wanted to perhaps frighten her enough so that she could be persuaded to leave the premises for good. He found any sort of public display of anger distasteful in the extreme, truth be told. He had no sympathy for her anger as he didn't understand where it came from. If she didn't like her job after all these decades, she could quit her job and get another. It was the first principle of Objectivist philosophy that one was always responsible. By not seeming to be responsible Marta was revealing herself as a person incapable of rational thought. He thought she might have crossed some crucial psychological threshold recently and now she was incapable of speaking truthfully. Krantz didn't give a damn about her. Old witch. He wished she'd eat shit and die.

"Milk," Krantz had said to her, "milk."

This was seconds after a faltering attempt at small talk was completed by Marta. "Well, I don't recall the good old days, any," he said. "If you ask me," he told her, "I think of it as all a lie. The Good Times. There never were any. I don't recall the past as any sort of place we could ever take refuge in," he told her. We simply remember things wrong. If you ask me, I think you're wrong on all fronts."

She had for a second an intention of walking out of Krantz' office momentarily to grab the unplugged electric pencil sharpener on her desk to throw at him. But like so many others while in the grips of losing it Marta Trask found her rage too compelling to be absent of it for more than an instant.

"You're a disgrace to the memory of your father," was one of the last things she said to Krantz before

leaving Lafayette Publishing for good. As the personality of Krantz the Elder was occasionally described during his eulogy as an “acquired taste,” this accusation was untrue. Profoundly untrue. Krantz the Younger was quite right when he described the remembered past as a lie. The old man’s crowning virtue nowadays was that he was a memory that could be shaped to fit any occasion for any purpose. Krantz the Elder, panty sniffer and brute extraordinaire, had managed to avoid being arrested while alive. This removed any objective taint to his memory. So many people who had known him including his long-suffering wife were no more. Clever people divined that all memory was a lie and set out to bend history to their own ends. They didn’t have to argue a goddamn thing. Unlike Marta Trask these people were not sentimental. Unlike her, they didn’t think the world was in constant decline. They didn’t see history as being cursed with any direction. Rather, it spasmed and flopped about like a caught fish on a dock. It was blind to its own actions. It lacked intentions altogether.

Seconds after she uttered it, Marta realized that the crack about Krantz’ father had gone too far. She had no intention of apologizing, however. Once she had recused herself from his office she went to fetch one of the boxes they had gotten into the habit of keeping around just in case an employee was unexpectedly let go. In fact, it was still a matter of contention between them as to whether Marta had been fired or whether she had quit. An arbitrator was scheduled to decide the matter three weeks from now. It was important regarding matters of compensation. Of course, Marta Trask wanted everything that was due her.

She wasn’t going to let Krantz get away with this final crime against her. Presently she was on her way to Times Square to visit a lawyer she had retained. As it was her dime, she didn’t think that there was any hurry involved. She didn’t think that she was required to meet him even though she had made an appointment last week.

She told Abe Minkowski that her most serious task today was to venture out to the pet cemetery in

Greenpoint, Brooklyn to lay a wreath on little Goethe's grave.

"It's something that I've been meaning to do for the past few weeks," she told Abe. "Only have been kept from doing so by all this work-related obnoxiousness."

If her arbitration hearing was successful, she was due a year's pay plus unemployment insurance. She thought this by itself coupled with her life savings would be enough to push her past the finish line for a relatively bearable retirement. She certainly had no intention of looking for another job. They could kick her out of her apartment for all she cared. She would eat garbage on the street before she went back to work. She assumed consignment in a mental institution would preempt that sort of miserable scenario anyway. She had at three years of relative comfort ahead before she would have to worry about it. They couldn't commit a woman who had no trouble paying her rent, after all. This, too, she would want to discuss with the lawyer in Times Square. She would want to create an attestation to her sanity well in advance of whatever action they decided to take. She wanted a shrink to certify her as sane. So when the accusation of non-compos mentis was made she would have a certain amount of ammunition to use against them.

Goethe if he was still alive presently would have been in a state of consternation over the behavior of his human mommy both in and out of the six hundred square foot apartment they had shared for fourteen years.

"A lot of weird hand gestures, a lot of staring at the TV while it's not on, also talking to people who aren't there as if to assure myself I'm still a person surrounded by other people and not some sort of animal who's incapable of forming words at all," she said to herself, characterizing her living situation nicely. "I smoke constantly even though it's against my lease. Now that I've been fired, I don't sleep soundly," she said. "I'm not going anywhere ever. I have no need to get up in the morning and prove myself worthy to anybody as if I'm still in my twenties and eager to prove that I belong."

She was speaking to this A-train conductor, Martine Hernandez. When after the entire train was stopped Martine had entered the nearly abandoned car within which Marta and her demons crouched like so many chapel-bound gargoyles waiting animation by some magic spell. Just past the Delancey Street station the car had been stopped for some time now. It was awaiting the arrival of the special unit of the NYPD charged with the disposal of what had recently been termed Biological Agent Deployments (BADs) within the New York subway's labyrinthine bowels. Just out of the last station, one of the mysterious sensors that had been installed by the Office of Homeland Security for monitoring just such occurrences had been tripped. The message broadcast to conductors contained the instruction that all subway traffic should come to an immediate halt. A disbursement of powdered anthrax was feared in this case. They were afraid that the air currents caused by the rushing trains would push the powder out to the fringes of the five boroughs like a plunger in a syringe.

This was the protocol that needed to be enacted whenever a sensor tripped. The conductors were to stop their trains at the nearest station and walk from car to car in search of the BAD's source. They had no preparation and no equipment to use once the source was encountered. Their only instruction was to not touch it and notify the police. Logic dictated that they remove everyone from the affected car, but this was not mandated by the OHS. They were basically on a hunt for a weapon of terror. Which, given their job description, was a deeply inappropriate activity.

Several years had passed since the "anthrax scare" of 2002 wherein the lethal bacillus in fine granulated form had been distributed through the mail to various members of congress, the president and vice-president, and to Judith Miller, a reporter for the *New York Times*.

"I'm surprised your union doesn't put up more of a fuss about what they make you do," Marta said to Martine after the first BAD inspection. There was nothing in the immediate surroundings to arouse suspicion. There were a few loose candy bar wrappers in the corner and a tourist's *Map of New York Subway* system folded

up over itself and abandoned in the panic that followed the initial announcement. A small amber plaque of dried urine in the car's far corner acted almost like a Proustian madeleine in recollection of the Bad Old Days of New York. This attracted nobody's attention. According to the FBI who had overseen the sensors' installation, the possibility of a false positive was remote. According to them, the automated tracking of BADs was highly sophisticated stuff. Their sensors' technology was generations beyond the home smoke detector the objects resembled at least when viewed at platform level. The device was supposed to signal to the subway's war room downtown when a pathogen was detected. It wasn't supposed to misfire exactly like it had on so many occasions up until now.

Yes, according to Martine, the Transport Workers Union that had represented all the Big Apple's conductors was suing the Bloomberg Administration because of this very practice. But the lawsuit had not resulted in the halting of these searches.

"Deep down they just don't give a shit," Martine said to Marta, talking about the union, the court system, and the Bloomberg Administration simultaneously. "They think it's better us than them. So they're enforcing the policy no matter what we say against them. Better us than them. There are conductors with legitimate illnesses, diabetes, who are forced to go and search for this shit without exception," she said. "They say to us, no exceptions, no exceptions. They got hidden cameras all around these trains monitoring what goes on all day. They're worried about spotting the source of the BADs as quickly as they can. From there they say they'll take robust measures. Who knows what that will be if they actually find anything. My guess is they'll close off whatever station they find it in and begin to pour cement at every choke point. They'll wall us all in and reroute the tracks around it. They'll cause a cave-in maybe behind the choke point. Cause then whoever it is trapped inside won't starve to death. It's the way they operate. I'm telling you. The way they think about things. They scared just like everybody else. But they're too stuck up to tell anybody the truth."

The NextGen sensors, according to Martine Hernandez, were less reliable than one of those department store carbon monoxide alarms that goes off sponaneously.

“It’s the same shit they got at a Home Depot,” Martine Hernandez said to Marta and looked under a plastic seat nearby. She was sick of this detail. This was the third time in the past six months the trains had ground to a hall because of it. Which perversely made Martine start hoping for an actual terrorist attack. At least then she would gain some satisfaction. She would realize that what she was doing all this time had been worthwhile. She’d be dead but at least her death would be imbued with purpose. Not like now where she was the subject of a practical joke. Daily she looked for the hidden cameras of the OHS on this train with vague intention of deactivating them. She assumed they were the objects driving the false alarms. People in the shadows thought it was funny what was going on. They were making videos of the consternation for purposes of putting them on YouTube later. They didn’t give a shit about the passengers on the train. To them it was a kind if video game.

Martine Hernandez was going to apologize to Marta Trask on the behalf of the New York City subway train conductors association. This was before she realized how fatuous the apology would have been.

“You can get out here and cross the bridge on foot,” she said to Marta. As if Marta, a forty-year resident of the City That Never Sleeps, required directions on how to move around the city. The problem for Marta was that she had no desire to walk anywhere any more without her little dog in tow. Taking long walks had always been an activity she and Goethe had done together. It would have been a betrayal of his memory if she had gone and walked across the bridge without him. She didn’t think it was appropriate. It would have been something that had left her entirely distraught even as she was attempting to comfort herself with this graveside visit.

The best outcome for Marta would have been for the train to begin moving again.

“We won’t be going anywhere for a while,” Martine Hernandez told Marta Trask. She waved her hands in the air as if conducting traffic. Marta didn’t want to know from bad news even if it affected her plans directly. She was in that superficially benign stage of mania where any sort of negative data was ushered out of the mind as fast as the brain’s synapses could fire. She couldn’t deal with the dissonance it caused in her if it was allowed to linger. She was old far past her calendar age. She didn’t deal with annoyances in an efficacious way. She was quick to anger and increasingly devoted to socializing with wholly imaginary characters. Abe Minkowski was only one of these characters. She was far than she believed she was. A mental health professional if consulted would render an elaborate diagnosis. But Marta Trask would have rejected the diagnosis completely and stormed out of the consulting room in disgust.

Marta Trask would not walk to Brooklyn. Whether she wanted to admit this or not, present circumstances left with her with a truly diminished set of options. Eventually she would chat up a gay couple in the West Village who would hail her a cab and she would be on her way. She would demand the driver wait the entire time she was in the pet cemetery. At that point the hectored Ukrainian driver would agree to any damn thing to get her out her cab. He would tell her yes then quickly speed away in the direction of Coney Island. This sort of bullshit they did not pay him enough to bear up to in a nice way. He thought of himself as an entirely independent operator despite his contractual obligations. He thought he could make his own work rules.

Until this had happened Marta Trask had time to wander around and contemplate the magisterial ruins of the city without as the city within.

When she emerged from the platform on Delancey Street, a fine rain was falling. Which was enough to dissuade most tourists from venturing outside.

“We are the real New Yorkers, the ones with guts, no bullshit, the ones that don’t give a damn,” the Vietnamese sandwich entrepreneur Joe Troi said to Marta Trask upon having her enter his emporium. Beneath

them the train was still stalled awaiting the incursion of anthrax-sniffing German Shepherds. What Joe was so happy about now was hard to say. As Marta Trask was his first prospective customer of that day.

His restaurant's present location was letting him down. He was a victim of the city's constant socio-economic re-shuffling. The hipster clientele that Joe had counted on when moving here eight years ago was vanished from the area by now. So many financial sector professionals who called the area home presently were indifferent to the fare Joe served. They preferred food from the Dean and Deluca's twelve blocks away. Joe's shop was too downscale a place for them regardless of how much he raised the prices on them or what sort of veneer of stainless steel and jet black aluminum he gave to his tiny storefront that advertised a (bogus) Michelin star. Presently he was contemplating a Williamsburg relocation but, to hear tell, even that neighborhood would soon be financially out of reach for a restauranteur such as himself who realized $7500 a month in sales.

Not for pussies the sign next to the pork banh mi now read. *Only cats.*

Of late, Joe had started placing all non-essential items in boxes prefatory to his move. He was doing it to remind himself that relocating was a fait accompli. Stuck in routine, life would go on for his sole proprietorship until it was too late to do anything about it. He needed to prepare himself for the great change ahead. Even now he was trolling the internet to research how he could burn himself out for the insurance money and avoid detection by the authorities.

Marta Trask didn't want a sandwich, let alone a Vietnamese sandwich and she couldn't be bothered to ask after the meaning of the feline references on Joe's chalk-drawn menu overhead. It was raining out and she simply wanted to remove herself from the rain. Everything in this city was suddenly on the verge of collapse. She didn't understand why it should be so difficult to visit a Brooklyn gravesite. Everything was under siege suddenly in the Big Apple. A war footing had taken hold which showed no sign of abating anytime soon. She didn't understand what adjustments to make

to ease her transition from independent person to ward of the state to anonymous corpse tossed into a communal Freshkills grave, mourned only by scavenger seabirds out for a protein fix prior to a hundred-mile expedition out to sea. She didn't understand the lay of the land anymore, which was surprising. as despite her superficial eccentricities Marta Trask was in possession of a keen intellect. Everything in the city had changed too quickly, however. She couldn't re-orient herself to her surroundings. She was at a loss for why this was. And she had no appetite anymore. For any type of food.

On the same wall where the menu was placed the restaurant's TV was tuned to CNN's twenty-four seven news cycle. Coverage of the horror in Iraq was on-going. It was constant and repetitive as the lapping waves off Staten Island. Marta Trask questioned the wisdom of such a channel choice.

"People don't want to eat and watch this terror," she told Joe Troi, glancing up to see the very tail end of the aforementioned Saddam hanging video play out. "Use your mind for what it's for," she told him. "This channel don't show anything that's remotely acceptable for family viewing. They don't think of ordinary people when they go on the air. They're not responsible journalists like the news anchors of old."

Joe Troi told Marta Trask that this might well be, but he still didn't change the channel. Not for her certainly. Even before she sat down, Joe had made Marta for a deadbeat. He had other paying customers who appreciated CNN's presence. Or at least he thought they did. Anyway, as the TV was turned away from him at all times he was immune to it, immune to the thudding dolorous war footage. He didn't see its broadcasting as such an offense. He saw it as deeply patriotic. Despite his superficial hipster irony, Joe Troi was a patriotic American. From personal experience he knew the alternatives to the American model to be so much worse than what they would replace. He thought at some unexpressed level the uncivilized people in Iraq were deeply deserving of the abuse they suffered at the Americans' hands. He thought that they had been given a tremendous opportunity at freedom and had blown the

opportunity because of religious superstition and infighting.

“You can order something and eat,” Joe told Marta seeing her fidgetiness in the presence of the CNN broadcast. “It will settle your stomach. It will give you courage for the long journey ahead.”

Where Marta was going next she was suddenly unsure. Unsure enough to want to know of Joe Troi what he meant exactly by “long journey ahead.”

“I’m sure you don’t place canine ingredients in any of your sandwiches,” Marta Trask said to him, mistaking a Korean cliché for a Vietnamese cliché.

“Just yours,” Joe Troi told her and smiled. In his best English told Marta Trask to get the fuck out. Too much of this race-baiting was in evidence in here nowadays, albeit with clientele far more upscale than Marta Trask. Some people of late liked to merely hangout in his restaurant rather than order anything. It was some sort of weird new trend that Joe didn’t appreciate in the least. Groups of similarly dressed young people would show up for several hours and congregate in back before moving on. He thought it must have all been coordinated by email at some point. He thought at some level it was all a joke perpetrated at his expense.

In the *Fashion Victim* storefront window just off Amsterdam Avenue, the video that was on autoloop had been produced by one Fred Dressup, a name Marta Trask recognized immediately for some reason from so many years past.

“He had a book through us,” she said to the store’s manager, Victoria Alshenka, when meeting her in *Fashion Victim’s* doorway. Victoria was smoking a cig far too close to the door to evade the wrath of the health police should they decide to make a pass down this block. “A book about falling men or men who fall,” she said. “There were men who fall,” she said, “and he made a book about it. Didn’t write it, he *made* it. I don’t know why. I don’t know its purpose,” she said. “I don’t know who the demographic for it might be. Or even how it should be read. He wanted people to stare at the pictures and see something in it. It’s like a children’s book. They would stare at these images and supposedly

see themselves falling from the ninetieth floor and experience something. Experience what? Something like being alive perhaps. If they stared at the images long enough, they would know what it was like to be condemned to have traded places with them for a few seconds," Victoria said and began to cough. All this talk had taken so much out of her. It had been any number of months since Marta had talked this much. She didn't know how to modulate her voice in the endeavor. She didn't know how to breathe any more between the words.

"My point," she said to Victoria, "was that you didn't need a book to lead you to knowing what it's like to be another person. Look in the mirror if you want to know this. My negative reaction to his book concerned its superfluity, not its danger. I didn't see its danger. He was not bright enough to be dangerous," she said. "He seemed a kind of beatnik to me, Fred. He was always dressed in black for some reason. When I first came to the city in the sixties he seemed the kind of black turtleneck-wearing boy my girlfriends and I would make fun of when going out for a night on the town in Greenwich Village. They might have had nice bodies, but they had no idea how to use them. They were lost to the world of fleshly desire. Their fathers had not taught them to be men. Which was why they behaved as they had."

According to Victoria Alshenka, Fred Dressup was a presently famous artist-journalist. Because he was now assumed dead, his video art in particular was most sought after. It had the highest re-sale value. It was meant to be played as a constant loop in an open space just like *Fashion Victim*'s storefront display. It was self-consciously art and could be priced as art. The Guggenheim uptown was making constant inquiries about the video's availability. But they wanted to be sure first that Dressup was actually dead. They wanted to make it clear to their patrons that the new century had produced its first cultural martyr. Because most definitely that's the way the display would be marketed.

Dressup's last reported sighting had been in Brooklyn in 2003. This was just after the editorial meeting he had with Valery Song.

“He was known to frequent this store constantly,” she said to Marta Trask who suddenly felt Goethe’s phantom leash pulling at her right wrist. Maybe this indicated that she wanted to be removed from this room. Her unconscious mind was telling her to scram pronto. Maybe it was something more than a tendril of dementia arriving in advance of the corpus.

“He was a known cross dresser, a known masochist,” she said to Marta in a practiced blasé tone of Fred. Here was the same spiel given to bumptious tourists as a tease unto the supposed decadence that lay within the store’s recesses. It didn’t matter if it was true. The old New York, the old bohemian New York of the Lower East Side, was constantly being revived for strictly commercial purposes in the twenty-first century. *Fashion Victim* wanted to carve out a niche in the post-boho market for their generic product line. They wanted to claim to tourists that they were something more than a slightly grungier version of *Hot Topic*.

The video on display showed a lecture in black and white by what looked to be a bald scientist in the 1950s. As explained by Fred Dressup’s notes that were recovered from his belongings once he was declared a mission person, this video was a “found” piece of history purporting to show a demonstration conducted about the efficacy of mind control by the Central Intelligence Agency. The scientist in the frame according to the notes was Dr. Sidney Gottschalk, supposedly deceased, who as of 1973 had been fired from the agency for the very activities he had been hired to perform. The Senate investigatory committee run by Senator Frank Church was on-going during that year and bodies were being thrown overboard daily in Langley in a frenzy of self-preservation. There wasn’t a lot of rational discourse in who was thrown under the bus apparently as the fear level was astronomically high. Nixon himself was being compelled to release his incriminating self-recordings. Vietnam was all but lost by then. And the Cold War was not going the way of the Free World.

In advance of Church Commission issuing a subpoena, the CIA’s then director, Richard Helms, took it upon himself to burn as many incriminating documents

as possible. The lion's share of documentation of what was known internally by the CIA as project MKULTRA had been destroyed. The reason this film was still intact was perplexing. Somebody had squirreled it away, had separated it from the official trove of information perhaps anticipating what would become of this dataset once the Company was awash in the cleansing light of public scrutiny and talk of serious jail time was in play from the director on down.

Dressup himself had no useful information to share as to how the film had come into his possession. He claimed merely that he had an acid-inspired vision one evening in Brooklyn and when that vision was over, the sixteen-millimeter film was his to do with as he saw fit. Here was a Wovoka type vision where the purely imagined might be allowed to pass into the realm of the real. When he was passed out in some un-marked barge, perhaps a true flesh and blood figure had given it to him. Strange that this should be so. As while alive Fred was not a person to inspire much confidence about his ability to disseminate the film unto the mainstream. He was a cult artist in those days with a cult following of one. Mostly Fred was known for his confrontational street videos wherein he would set out to "liberate" a particular participant/victim of his or her inhibitions through the serial violations of the unwritten rules of etiquette. His unstated purpose for such videos was to shock the bourgeois out of their complacency. Which was such a shopworn sentiment that when the videos were finally released bored scorn was the only real sentiment that they could be met with (rather than the hysteria or alarm that he was trying to generate).

Fred lacked the magic touch. He likely never would have had much of a career except for the fact of his mysterious death. So it was that another art martyr was vomited forth. Also, there was his somehow murky relationship with the CIA to be considered when weighing a dead artist's "importance." He was relevant if only because he knew certain people.

"They say it was a rogue agent taking out his frustration on him for spilling the beans," Victoria Alsheka said to Marta Trask of Fred's death. As she

spoke, she revealed a New Jersey accent that up until this time had been mostly buried because of the way she had studiously pronounced every syllable.

According to Marta Trask, this was not likely.

“He was a moron, not a hero,” she told Vickie. “Nobody with any power would ever confide in him.”

She thought that whatever Fred had stumbled upon while wasted in Brooklyn had been intentionally placed in his way. He hadn’t revealed anything to anybody. He didn’t know anything to begin with. He wasn’t that sort who had the ability to network on his own. He was self-absorbed to a fault. There was a touch of Asperger’s to his demeanor. He would never in a million years cop to being a mere journalist though this was the only profession he had ever demonstrated a real talent for. His 9/11 coffee table book was an atrocity as far as Marta concerned. She had been deeply heartened by its poor sales numbers. He thought Krantz the Younger should have learned from this mistake but there was no educating a fool. Krantz was chasing illusory markets in an effort at making book publishing “relevant” again. Marta Trask doubted that publishing was ever relevant at least not in the way Krantz had used/abused the word. Books were a medium that required patience and commitment on the part of the reader. It was built for squares, stay at home bodies, shut-ins, and anti-social cranks of the sort that Marta Trask had devolved into during her late middle age.

On the video, Sid Gottschalk was standing in front of a blackboard sprinkled with indecipherable symbols.

“Everything you see is real,” Vickie said to Marta mimicking Gottschalk’s speech that was inaudible from outside the display window. It was impossible to verify if this was true. But because Sid had to say it at all real doubt was cast on the statement’s veracity. To judge by first impressions, Sidney Gottschalk didn’t seem the P.T. Barnum type who would heighten audience expectations unduly. He had a flat affect that suggested somebody unfamiliar with the finer points of social grace. He could not manipulate through words alone. He didn’t seem to have any bit of showman in him.

He was merely giving a report both to his live audience and to posterity. Victoria had the sense that Gottschalk cared more about the latter than the former. He was too stiff a personality type to be any sort of suck-up. Maybe it was the case that the internal audience wasn't there. Constantly Gottschalk was seen looking away from the camera towards a hypothetical other. But just because this person's presence was assumed didn't mean he (or she) was there.

The "art" in the art project, which was to say Fred's entire contribution to it (besides having discovered the film in the first place), was to superimpose various childishly drawn doodles and slogans over the on-going action as (one assumed) a sort of running commentary.

Nihilism=love deflated, Fred wrote in what might have been assumed as a digitized approximation of an orange crayon on the part of the film where a woman was brought in so that she could tear the eyelids from her eyes. Yes, that's right. The eyelids from her eyes. She did it on Sid Gottschalk's command with a single word whispered in one ear. Up until that point the woman seemed almost as disaffected as him. She did it without prodding. As if she had been training for the moment until a level of easeful expertise was attained.

Know that when the eyelid is torn away profuse bleeding follows. Soon both of the volunteer's eyes were not seeming to be eyes but dynamic flows like the famous Eduardo Carrillo painting of Christ on the cross with effluence pouring from every facial orifice.

Nobody rushed to the woman's aid. Dr. Gottschalk was unmoved by the spectacle. He seemed slightly irritated for some reason. As if the time it had taken for the woman to get on with it was insufficient to his needs. He had planned on a display altogether more rote and passionless. The woman was intended to have been so far gone that any trepidation concerning the pain she was causing herself would be overwhelmed by the automatic responses that would have been activated by Sidney with a single spoken word. It was supposed to have been like watching a robot perform, rather in this instance a coerced human being. It was supposed to have been broadly comic rather than sickly terrifying.

The last fatty end of each lid was proving to be difficult to remove by her. He seemed at the point of yelling cut to the cameraman.

Impressive or disgusting? Impressive (when one was in some sort of authoritarian frame of mind) and disgusting at once.

“What, if anything,” Marta asked Victoria Alshenka, “does any of this have to do with selling secondhand dresses to little rich girls?”

As an answer Vickie recalled that during 9/11 dozens of people from the surrounding neighborhood gathered into *Fashion Victim*’s tiny space with the intention of holding an impromptu End of the World Celebration.

“We didn’t think any of us were going to survive it,” she said to an uncomprehending Marta. “So many of us acted like you would if you thought the end of the world was fast approaching. We took off our clothes and started to fuck. Didn’t matter with who or how it was done. We fucked. We all were filled with the rage to live. Or something. The rubble cloud was creeping up Canal Street all the while. By the time we got up from the floor the storefront window was stained dirty brown. Anybody outside had become zombies. We truly thought that this was the end for us. Or we didn’t have a clue. We weren’t big TV news watchers back then. Nobody I knew followed current events.”

According to Victoria, the real fun on that red letter day was pursued after sun set. This was when a curfew had been in place for the lower part of Manhattan and those already in the store had nowhere else to go.

“We did these,” she said to Marta and reached into her (ironically worn) apron for the large red capsules she kept in case of as she would term it “emergencies.”

“Halzion,” she said. Which ironically enough was a concoction of Sid Gottschalk’s CIA. The drug had been distributed onto the streets in the early eighties to winnow the troublesomely burgeoning Afro-American population. In a way it was the most lethal recreational drug ever invented as its hallucinogenic effects were subtle and proceeded over many years even after a single dose. It re-wired the reality-forming apparatus of the mind usually to the detriment of the body. It imposed

a type of low-level insanity on the person wherein the fabric of ordinary perception would become rife with tiny perforations. The subject's unconscious desires and barely known figments would usually fill the space that existed. And so, dream objects and reality would become entirely interchangeable properties or at least indistinguishable. Those on Halzion couldn't distinguish thought from experience. Which was the way so many people nowadays preferred it. Once on Halzion people were not responsible for their actions let alone their dreams. For Victoria Alsheka and her friends, such a state was the only real freedom available at the outset of the twentieth first century. As freedom was a political term, they would never think of themselves as free. They didn't have real ideas of the world like literate people had. They had feelings and vivid experiences, rather, just like dogs did.

They wanted to be free maybe but didn't know what it meant to be free, couldn't attach words to the vague yearning, that itch somewhere just above the liver.

"You look like you've had your fill already," Victoria Alshenka told Marta Trask about the magic red capsules in her possession. But, then again, maybe not. There was still such a thing as the ordinary lunatic in this life, those on Halcion as opposed to Halzion. Marta didn't seem the partying type. Maybe she was playing coy with Victoria so that she could swipe her stash. Maybe she knew far more about downtown than she was letting on.

With somebody like Marta—caustic old bag—you couldn't tell for sure how forthright she was in her answers. You couldn't tell what was required of her. She didn't act like a normal person even during those times when it was in her best interests to do so. She lacked the requisite control usually associated with a normal person though this might have all been a show put on for the benefit of gullible strangers. Nowadays it was a treat to be thought of as strange. It was a hedge against the ignominy brought on by a society wherein ordinary human interaction was increasingly centered around the maintenance and care of machines. So, the weirder you were the less of a machine-slave you appeared, at least on superficial inspection. It was the same with *Fashion*

Victim's front window display. It was all about declaring yourself as somebody far removed from the pack. Which was a very pack-like sentiment to hold.

Human beings were not as smart as they judged themselves to be. They only had a few tricks. After that they were mere fodder for worms. They still needed to be flattered, however. The purpose of the new bohemian was to publicize this flattery. Your average twenty-first century boho was an empty vessel, filled to the brim with the inexplicable and inoffensive. He was a cultural placeholder functioning to maintain a myth that the United States was a country where even a moderate level of free expression was allowed. His cultural products were all designed for callow shock value, stripped of true political content. He needed to be seen and commented upon if only to keep the average jerk on a street corner asleep for just a little while longer.

Who knew about Marta? Her manias might have been playacting initiated for a specific off-putting effect. Especially in the new New York of forty-five hundred dollar a month studio apartments and Disney parades, benign weirdoes were in constant demand. Why, Victoria Alshenka was one of these self-conscious weirdoes. In reality, she didn't have a radical thought to counter the inflow of numbing capitalist dross. But she came on like the Queen Bitch of the True Underground. She had ten piercings, for example, one for every side of a Satanic pentacle tattooed on her stomach. As well as two in her tongue, one in each nipple, and one in her clitoral hood. She had a tattoo sleeve running down her right arm that was purported to be a fleshy mural of her female lovers caught in flagrante. Twelve in all she would admit to (though she was not gay). Merely she lived life to the fullest. Like so many others she couldn't afford the New York rents, so she slept in the back of her store.

The man she imagined as the living incarnation of this new way of living, Dr. Sidney Gottschalk, was, as his want every so often, suddenly next to Victoria Alshenka. They were in her backroom of her store. Marta Trask was long since departed for the pet cemetery in Brooklyn and the still real experience of grieving at a loved one's grave, wishing they were still there with you or wishing

at a minimum that you could change places with them so that the grief could be transmogrified (perhaps) to the peace of mere non-existence for either a moment or the span of all creation and a day.

In this incarnation Sidney was just as he had been in the found video installation of Fred Dressup's. To Victoria Alshenka he was not even remotely handsome. But he was alluring in some non-specific way. He seemed empty of any concern to her apart from the requirements of the present moment. Cold but guileless, which was a strange combination to encounter in this day and age. He didn't seem to have her or anybody else's best interests at heart. His allure likely existed in admirers trying to ascertain what master he served. He seemed a person inherently good at keeping secrets. He had no desire to make new friends. Ever. He was largely indifferent to the dictates related to historical relevance. He did what he wanted absent of a desire to be on the winning side. His appetites were of an otherworldly nature. He didn't know how to fit in with common folk and lacked the desire to try.

He said to Victoria Alshenka that an aged, isolated form of himself was in suburban Washington preparing to shuffle off this mortal coil.

"Eighty-seven this month," he told Victoria Alshenka. "I've lived a long and, in many ways, pointless life," he said. "I have no desire to go any farther. I'm glad it's almost at any end."

He said for several years that he had a desire to tell his side of the story. But this endeavor ended in a failure large enough to be considered now the biggest of his career.

"Ordinary fools should generally not be hired to perform the work better suited to ordinary knaves," was how he described this attempt at objectifying his own experience through the intermediary of a journalist of entirely suspect emotional moorings. Presently he could now see that he had chosen the wrong man for the job. But it was too late to start again.

He told Victoria that, looking back on it, he could very well have written his own memoirs. But at the time it seemed a task both beneath him and too burdensome

to perform ably. He had needed to trust himself a little more, he supposed. But at the time it seemed too much work to do by himself.

He had no issue taking his secrets with him to the grave, but it would have been interesting to have fended off the outraged accusations of those who should have known better than to have been outraged in the first place.

“My placement in so-called posterity is irrelevant to me,” he told Victoria going onto articulate his well-developed theory about time’s passage having been an illusion spawned by the further illusion that an indestructible substance of some sort dwelt inside the human breast rather than just (as biologists would have it) consecutive accretions of protein chains. To a rubber band, let’s say, the idea of the Infinite Now was completely comprehensible if not entirely instinctive. From the perspective of inanimate objects there was no change from one moment to the next. Only sentience provided unenlightened creatures with a sense of history. Therefore, with a desire to be recalled. As if one’s historical rank was taken with one to the grave. He certainly didn’t believe any part of a man survived the grave. As he didn’t believe there was any supernatural substance that dwelt within human beings. This link between soul and memory was obvious to him. He only superficially understood the link between ordinary people’s outrage over projects such as MKLUTRA and their need to be in the good graces of the Lord. They needed to realize that all sins were forgiven upon entering the realm of the dead. They needed to be made aware that for a man of high reason there was no such concept as sin.

He thought he might as well repudiate those for the temporary comfort their repudiation of him provided them. On the other hand, and this people truly needed to internalize, self-delusion was seldom present in those who have learned to be masters of their fate.

“I do not believe myself to have been especially harmed by my fellow men,” this vision of Sidney Gottschalk said to Victoria Alshenka and studied if only briefly *Fashion Victim*’s product offering lined up on

grossly twisted dummies along the store's walls. They were all absurd to him at some essential level. They existed obviously not as mere garments but as defiant statements of being. They were pragmatic in no discernable way. Slits up the middle and slits in back made with an exacto knife after initial purchase. Women's clothes they were for the most part. The store was trying to reinvigorate a long dormant look in the Lower East Side related to punk rock. But its clientele was too young to understand the association.

Better off wearing nothing than these, according to Sid. Because at least with nothing one would have reverted to a state where one was truly challenging the fashion status quo. And it was likely a good deal more comfortable than these hastily assembled rags.

"Better go inside your room," he told her, and remove the mask. That mask that shielded all the other masks from view. Down below in careful sequence.

"We don't need to talk about such things just yet," Sidney Gottschalk told her as she passed her hand through him to check after the intensity of her vision. Of course, he wasn't real but, then again, (and this was the important point) neither was she. This Victoria had come to believe that the more drugs she did the more profoundly the hallucinations would be melted into her ordinary perceptions irrevocably. She had no support system really as she was far away from her hometown in New Jersey. Her friends downtown were vampires of a particularly blood less variety. She was slowly letting her body slip away like her own memories. Soon she would be no more.

On that fateful day of 9/11, a man covered in the towers' pulverized remains had entered and cursed her and her friends by placing a hunk of the building in the pocket of the homemaker's apron she now wore so proudly.

"Ever since then," she told Sid, "Nothing's been the same. Ever since then I feel older than I am. I'm twenty-seven and I feel fifty-nine. And after age sixty all people might as well curl up into a ball and die."

It was thirty-five blocks from Fashion Victim's retro store to the memorial site long since remained Ground

Zero. So, you'd have to wonder how so many parties at once kept confusing the two as if they were interchangeable spaces.

By two thirty that afternoon Victoria Alshenka was high on angel-dusted weed, ignorant of the two customers presently in her store, and eager to get away for good.

An oddly familiar couple from Nebraska wearing Cornhusker sweatshirts walked in and wanted to know which way was it to the 9/11 memorial.

"Here let me draw it for you," Victoria Alsheka said to them and picked up the aforementioned exacto knife. Putty in her hands they were at one point. They wanted to see an artifact of human tragedy: here y'go.

But once she started, she wasn't drawing it really in any accurate way.

A Decayed House (October 2005)

I.

Somewhere in southeastern Poland, on the shoulder of a one lane road devoid of either signage or a paved surface, the half-preserved body of Captain Witold Pilecki, forgotten hero of WW II, resided. It was propped up with his medals pinned to his left breast. It sported the same cropped haircut that Captain Pilecki had died with hard against the Ministry of Public Security's bullet-riddled wall.

Factoring in that he had been dead and, despite best efforts at preservation, rotting for the past sixty-eight years, Captain Pilecki didn't look so bad.

"Take a picture with me with him when you're ready," Brain Sane, a twenty-eight-year-old CIA case officer hailing from Christiansburg, VA, told Rob George using a tone of voice that did not admit whether i he might be fucking around.

Brian seemed unaffected by the shrine's dilapidated solemnity. He didn't know from Yad Veshem and didn't care. He was a shit kicker with a baccalaureate degree in shit kicking (Political Science) from the University of Virginia. He was recently licensed to kill. He possessed only a superficial level of civility that seemed elusive to him whenever he was free of adult supervision.

He wanted a photo, he said, to send to his sweetheart back home. He hadn't yet entirely internalized this undercover agent stuff. He had a Facebook page, for example, where he had more or less outted himself as being in the Agency's employ. The

photos would go there, as well as to his sweetheart's email inbox.

Brian wanted to demonstrate to the world that he was for real. That he wasn't some ex-jock with a James Bond fixation. That he was here in Poland like he had claimed he was and not in some Buttfuck, New Jersey office park like his little brother back in Christiansburg had constantly accused him of being.

In its present state the face of Captain Pilecki was, in Brian's opinion, as Polish as it got.

Its rotten contours were in possession of deep brown manifolds like the surface of those miniature tubers whose mash they had distilled into vodka around here. The Poles currently were trying their best to be good modern Europeans and failing constantly. They were falling back on old habits. Brian Sane admired them for their backwardness. They reminded him of the mountain folk from whence he sprang.

Speaking of which, once his flip phone had been handed back to him, Rob looked around wondering after availability of the local hootch.

"Out here they got 'em a still at every roadside attraction," Sane said to Rob comparing the practice to the legendary moonshiners of Tennessee. "Folks out here do for themselves," he said. "They do for themselves as nobody else will do for them."

Not a handwritten sign in Polish was in sight. In English visitors were notified if for example a donation was welcome. For now, Captain Pilecki's presence assured Sane what country they were still in.

"Food for the crows right there if they aren't careful and swap out the fluids every now and again," Brian said to Rob idly of Pilecki's corpse. He cast his eyes to the adjacent farmhouse's back where he said—just like in Smoky Mountain lore—the stills were usually kept.

According to an explanatory sign in English, the initial embalming job on Poland's favorite son was sub-optimal owing to a bit of post war formaldehyde scarcity. As recompense for damages done, somebody had replaced Wiltold's rotten eyeballs with oblong porcelain marbles that seemed like the real thing. A quarter inch thick layer of make-up had been applied to exposed

areas of skin to cover up all the fissures. Presently the Captain looked like a flaccid zombie prepped for a night out. Post-apocalyptic Vegas chic. Somebody had done the best they could with him. They were intent on keeping his memory alive.

Witold Pilecki's face was in possession of a certain waxen dignity because of all this work performed post-mortem. He didn't look like a war hero so much as a war hero's simulacrum rendered by Madame Tussaud on a particularly bad day. Only Brian Sane had noticed the discrepancy. He wanted another photo from Rob this time at a more obscuring angle. The sun had not yet passed behind the mountains. He wanted Rob to demonstrate his value and get creative about such serious matters as these.

"Y'all have fucked my day up one time too many," Sane told Rob handing him the flip phone once more. Pausing first to remove his Ray-Bans so that they didn't fall into the space between the monument and the granite pedestal supporting the bulk of World War II's most overlooked hero, Brian Sane made a kissy face at the Captain's gruesome visage. He didn't give a damn how any of this looked, to either Rob or the shrine's Polish keeper, Ignatz Fedorowicz. In addition to his Natural Redneck Tendencies (NRTs), Brian Sane was medium-level wasted from the same psychoactive substance he had slipped into Rob's 7-and-7 at the Café Chopin back in Warsaw. Against official protocol (and the best interests of the United States likely), Sane was in the midst of what was termed by the dean of students at UVA blowing off steam. Steam was blown off at UVA whenever one of the frats had decided to throw a rager. Brian had had it up to here with the QT required of all serious spy work. The circuitous routes taken back and forth from a given black site were a chore to endure. Officially non-existent, these sites were so remote that there had been some question what country they were actually in. Maps provided no answer. And nowadays many intra-European borders were unattended and the black sites obviously were devoid of a mailing address.

Sane seemed too young for this detail, if only emotionally. But, then again, perhaps such rowdy

conspicuousness as he specialized in had all been part of the CIA's plan. They wanted Sane to announce their presence in Eastern Europe loudly. By doing so he would deflect any charge that he was doing something wrong intentionally.

He was hiding in plain sight so to speak with his NRTs on full display. The Company wanted to make it clear that it was in Poland for the duration of the war on terror. Even if the black site in question, God willing, was only a flash in the pan, it was here for the duration. Ever since the Iron Curtain's collapse, the CIA had operated more or less out in the open in Poland. It wanted to make clear that there was continuity regarding the clandestine operations ongoing in Eastern Europe after the invasion of Iraq. They wanted to make it clear that they hadn't missed a beat between the Cold War and the War on Terror. They wanted to make it clear that they took this part of the world and its security concerns seriously even as they made plans to turn it into a dumping ground for Middle East rogues too high priority to subject to the vagaries of the Geneva Convection or even, perish the thought, U.S. criminal law.

The CIA was still the CIA. It was a paramilitary organization at its core. Procedures relating to the upholding of secrecy rules needed to be enforced. For example, its officers didn't have Facebook pages.

"They chaff my ass routinely up there with the rules and regulations bullshit," was how Brian Sane put it to Rob, concerning the feedback he was getting for his southern frat boy ways. "There's the way things oughta be as opposed to the way things usually are," he said to Rob, who like his host was feeling no pain. "But if they didn't want a hell raiser over here, they wouldn't have pushed me forward," he said, demonstrating a level perceptiveness that Rob, having observed him over the past two hours, wouldn't have thought he was capable of. "Hell, I never volunteered for a goddamned thing in my life," Sane said. "Supposed to be back in D.C.," he said, "as Pentagon errand boy. The Pentagon needed to be told by the CIA daily what they already know," he said. "Which is that they all have another Vietnam on their hands. Exactly. Forty percent of the nation of Iraq

as we speak is not subject to the interim government's writ. They're hot after Al Qaeda but this is a distraction that makes the fucked-upness of the situation tolerable to those who fucked it up to begin with. Look, it's a festival of hate," he said about Iraq. "The Shia's hate the Sunnis and the Sunnis hate the Yezidis who hate the Alawites and vice-versa. And they all to a man hate the Americans with a passion that keeps them from considering the possibility that they should all band together temporarily against their oppressor and renew their own battle later. The day that thought occurs to them is the day the war will begin to end to the disfavor of the United States. Until then it's a patchwork operation. They're trying to look for a graceful exit but won't admit it. They're blaming everything on Al-Zarqawi. They have set up black sites in Europe like the one we're going to, to fight fire with fire. This is all revenge-oriented activity, but they won't say as much even when talking amongst themselves. The intelligence that they're dredging up from these operations has mostly to do with activity limited to a single AQ cell. It's chaos over there and, by definition, chaos has a low intelligence yield. But they're pressing forward with these operations like it's a normal war. They're happy to be at war if only because it justifies their budgets. They have procedures in place for when the war ends at all these sites. The procedure calls for burning every building to the ground and shredding every computer hard drive a year before they close shop. All the old timers talk about the Church Commission like it was the Salem Witch Trials all over. At the commission formed about the CIA's role in Iraq they'll be given absolutely nothing. That's what they spend their days doing. Covering up. Officers will abandon their citizenship rather than testify. They have a black budget set up to make this happen. They have special machines built for hard drive shredding. The NSA is chipping in along with the Pentagon. Nobody's going to jail over this. There won't even be a single reprimand issued if everything goes according to plan."

Conceiving of himself as a fundamental outsider, Brian didn't implicate himself in this extra-legal derring-

do even though quite likely he would be well within the crosshairs of whatever goody-two-shoes, swishy, liberal-dominated “truth commission” was set up, once the American people finally realized the full extent of the Middle East bungle. Brian was too young still to realize himself as part of a partisan battle over the shape of American foreign policy. He conceived of himself as somebody just along for the ride. He would have been shocked to realize that others hadn’t conceived of him in the exact same manner. He thought it was obvious that he just a floater, a boozy frat boy four years out of school whose eyes glazed over when the talk turned to matters of nation building. Pussy and booze occupied the young man’s mental landscape to the point of obsessiveness. Oftentimes he would forget the reason he had been assigned here. On such occasions he would be briefed all over again. Common sense dictated that this was no way to win a war. They were shooting blindly down a pitch-black hall. Eventually they would calm down and think their way out of this mess.

Sane thought that whenever this inflection point was reached, whenever the geopolitical shit hit the fan so to speak, he would be long gone from the CIA entirely. He would transition into some lucrative private security-based endeavor in the burgeoning private security markets of Eastern Europe.

“It’s like the Peace Corps, only without the smug sense of satisfaction later on,” he had said to Rob of his impressions of the Company while at Café Chopin, sampling a bit of the locally brewed vodka for himself. Well, look, they had obviously hired the wrong man for the job if they wanted a true believer. Indeed, Brian thought of this posting as mere post-graduate work, an extended bit of indentured duty prior to taking up the real work of a lifetime, which he imagined would eventually lead to nightclub ownership and fame in various East European capitals where the girls were as advertised, smoking hot and educationally and socially deprived. Sane saw himself as their destiny. But that would have to wait until the hour of his resignation.

For now, he had been given a specific assignment. This was to shepherd Rob George up to the CIA

interrogation facility that was Brian's unofficial office. This was on orders of a very senior placed official. The CIA was proceeding as if it had nothing to hide. Which of course was not the case. Sane had sworn George to secrecy then drugged him and blindfolded him so that he wouldn't remember anything exactly the way it was. But even an espionage tyro like Brian could identify Rob George's presence in Poland as a major breach of established protocol. A black site such as the one they were bound for would never be recognized as having existed by the federal government. It would never (or rather should never) be open to the scrutiny of journalists. How Rob had gotten the invite was an enduring mystery. But he hadn't seemed surprised by any of this filled with wonder at the degree of his access.

Sane assumed George was trading on existing information already in his possession.

"You're the man who knows all, sees all," he had said to Rob by means of an introduction back in the hotel lobby.

Hard to imagine what sort of dirt Rob could have that would allow him to tour a place that even members of the Senate Intelligence Committee were forbidden to go. Brian would have assumed an assassination would have been the order of the day to deal with a blackmailing reporter, but he might have been overestimating the CIA's ferocity nowadays. He didn't know if things such as assassination still went on at CIA, at least when directed against U.S. citizens. But he assumed that they had. He had seen enough to know of the patrician violence that lay at the organization's center. He had sat in enough meetings to be convinced of the at-root cynicism at so many Company leaders. These illuminati viewed ethical constraints as external obstacles to either be negotiated around or ripped through by brute force. CIA officers viewed themselves as a type of military caste. They were not the sort to simply yield to an external threat. They dealt with blackmailers in the form of rogue agents all the time. They weren't the sort to make rash decisions in the face of public embarrassments or even information leaks that would yield to real harm.

Another dynamic was at play here. Maybe somebody wanted something revealed to serve his own needs apart from the CIA's. Maybe this was the way of letting the cat out of the bag, in front of a real investigation. In such an eventuality everything would come undone. Which further suggested to Brian that maybe he should expedite his resignation and start scouting for club space in the dank wilds of Sofia, Bulgaria.

"You don't have to tell me what you're doing here on my account," Brian Sane said to Rob after he had his fill of the Pilecki pictures. He assumed he would never find out what Rob was doing. So there was no sense asking. Anyway, it was none of his business really. Sane was socialized enough to not directly question the dictates of authority. He assumed every authority was universally wrong-headed, but he didn't directly question them. They would over time beach themselves on the rocky shoals of political reality. And then he would consider himself blessed to be out of the information loop.

In fact, the order providing Rob with access to the black site had been issued by assistant director Martin Veblin. Veblin had been recruited out of Harvard University in 1965 by the legendary Josiah Dorset, the CIA's counterintelligence chief. Dorset by that time had taken to showing up to work with his face covered in white powder like a mask. This was in emulation of his idol, T.S. Eliot. He felt himself more of a poet than a cold warrior by then. He had entered the wilderness of mirrors and found the reflection in their surfaces greatly distressing.

Brian Sane had never heard of Dorset and barely had heard Veblin's name. Time had performed its usual service of eroding historical consciousness to the tiniest of nubs (T.S. Eliot: *And through the spaces of the dark/Midnight shakes the memory/As a madman shakes a dead geranium*). In Brian's presence Rob had mentioned Dorset and also Sidney Gottschalk a time or two. In doing so he was flashing his knowledge of the CIA hierarchy like a cop flashed his badge at a traffic stop. He was supposed to have mentioned the name and quelled all doubts about his legitimacy instantaneously.

He was wrapping himself in Dorset and Gottschalk's aura and waiting for the seas to part.

The problem with a secret society such as that which the Central Intelligence Agency had turned itself into from the mid-fifties onward was that it was hard to maintain historical continuity about its history and its purpose even to those few it might be inclined to share such information with.

"You don't know the half of it, man," Rob had told Brian from the other side of the marble table in the café while the upturned vodka glasses slowly accrued in the vanishing space between them. Café Chopin was a French café in the heart of Warsaw. Its name was typical, owing to the fact Polish native culture had either been retarded or completely obliterated in the decades of the country's imprisonment. Only Polish vodka, water of life, aunt of wine, had survived the occupation with reputation intact. Nowadays your average Pole hated all things Russian. But hatred of the other wasn't enough to revive let alone sustain a culture. So, they borrowed liberally from the West, playing make-believe. They were good Europeans in their imaginations, NATO members in good standing once all the Putin-driven objections were discounted. The Polish people couldn't internalize the truth. Which was that they existed as a buffer between a weak and profligate Western Europe and a Russian autocracy that was increasingly vocal about reconstituting the Soviet Bloc.

In another life Rob George might have summoned the requisite energy to write a book about the subject, reasoning that since no serious books were actually read anymore, he was free to explore any subject that he would care to. In a post-literate age commercial motives for serious books were beside the point. The writing was its own reward. His political analysis of Eastern Europe would stretch to six volumes. It would be self-published and self-edited. He could find work teaching school to support himself during this massive endeavor.

To Rob, Brian Sane seemed a lout if only because the secret history of the CIA had been successfully kept secret from him. If an insider like Sane was ignorant of Sidney Gottschalk, the average U.S. citizen would be too

for evermore. If he had tried a course of education for Brian quite likely Dr. Gottschalk's exploits wouldn't have made any sort of impression on him. Ordinary Americans long since had lost the ability to be outraged over civil liberty violations on the part of their government. They all had assumed tyranny (or at the very least coercion by the duly elected government) as a given. They believed in it as a necessary component of social functioning.

The average jerk on the street was deeply cynical about politics nowadays. Which of course had the perverse effect of further enabling the authoritarianism that was the root of the cynicism. From the perspective of the CIA this degenerate cycle was a happy, though by no means planned, effect. They were increasingly confident that they could reveal so much more about themselves to the American people than previous administrations dared. They reasoned that the CIA's true role in American affairs had long since been internalized by the average jerk on the street. The CIA was corrupt, anti-democratic, anti-individualist, pro-business, and pro-fascist (when on those increasingly rare occasions a fascist dictator allied himself with the United States). Everybody knew this, though the dirty laundry that proved it had yet to be aired. Here was the plausible reason for Rob George being allowed to visit. This was the first stage in a greater era of openness for the Central Intelligence Agency. They had already won the hearts and minds of the American people, albeit in a backhanded way. They wanted to relieve themselves presently of the burden of secrecy. They were attempting it in stages likely knowing that George was an independent operator and could be dispatched without real trouble if he became unmanageable for them.

Rob had been kicking around these ideas ever since the meeting in Warsaw. There, a Humvee with diplomatic license plates awaited him in Café Chopin's narrow alley.

"What was in the liquor?" he had asked Brian Sane twenty minutes after entering the Humvee's spacious interior. This Hummer was a military vehicle strictly. It was straight off the C-140 down to its olive-drab paint job. It might as well have been painted with the stars and

stripes for all the camouflage it provided passengers in this city of Russian Ladas and eighties era VWs bought on the black market in the early nineties. The CIA had no intention of hiding its presence in Eastern Europe. Not anymore. They were either trying to be reassuring to their Polish hosts, or utterly duplicitous in their dealings with them over the "detention" facilities that they had constructed absent of an official go ahead both here and in Romania.

Halzion was the only narcotic Sane would admit to dosing Rob with. Though to judge by the disorientation it provided Rob there was some other hallucinogenic substance that had been administered as well.

"Acid?" Rob George wanted to know.

"If I had a blotter of acid out here, motherfuck," Brian Sane had told him, "The last thing in the world I'd do is give some to you."

In reality, Brian didn't know the name of the drug that he had poured into Rob's 7 and 7. Merely, they told him it was Halzion and packaged it as such. The standard CIA practice in Poland was to distribute this experimental drug at raves packaged as ecstasy and observe the results. Sometimes nothing. Sometimes subjects went off their heads and fell to the ground and started twisting on their right shoulder a' la Curley Howard in an especially good episode of *The Three Stooges*. They babbled, they dribbled, they saw God in all things and the devil in the details. A lot of pissing of pants occurred. Also there came an inability to speak clearly for hours after the buzz wore off. Nobody complained afterwards about their trips but considering the source this was not high praise. So many of the young people in this part of the world had given up on any sort of normal existence. The promise of what EU membership had once meant for them was long since tarnished. Many were waiting around for the next political crisis to re-organize society. Until it happened, there was no sense in turning down a free high. It didn't matter to them whether they recovered from it fully. Better for them if they didn't, actually. It would dull the outrage of a false promise of post-Communist prosperity for this generation. It would make them more amenable to the impositions of

whatever form of government was imposed on them once the democratic system failed.

Acid, *sh-macid*, according to Brian Sane. It didn't matter how you got high as long as it was a good buzz. The damage so to speak, was done. So, Rob George might as well stop worrying. In all candor he didn't know what he had imbibed. Somebody in George's position would be better off not knowing. The whole fucking point with him was to discourage his inquisitive nature. He was not amongst friends here. Even if the drug didn't damage his memory, he was wise to pretend that it had.

"Little dip here my man to push against," Brian Sane said to an addled Rob George as the Humvee settled into the roadside ditch that seemed to serve as a spillway and garbage receptacle for the farmhouse at once. Not that he really cared after Rob's well-being, but Brian felt the need to express concern for him. It was his duty to shepherd him safely unto the black site. Nobody in charge would be singing his praises if George should not make it beyond this farmhouse's precincts and be discovered floating face up in the ditch.

Once the shrine's caretaker, Fedorowicz, had emerged from the farmhouse's aromatic interior, there came a greater degree of clarity for Rob about the degree of his presently addled state. He could only judge his own responses. He felt he lacked the objectivity otherwise. He felt certainly that Brian Sane was even more wasted than him now and couldn't be counted on for an objective assessment.

Ignatz Fedorowicz looked about fifty-five (at least in American terms) and walked slowly enough toward the prospective pilgrims to clue them into the reality that whatever pride he felt in being the shrine's caretaker had long since vanished for good.

"Of this age," Ignatz said to Rob in surprising English, "nobody can be said to care. Our hero might as well have been a stuffed squirrel for all the angst it arouses in patrons," he said of Captain Pilecki. "They see the military medals and they are impressed," he said to them. "They want to know what is the number Pilecki has killed," he said. "They want to know what great

battle he was involved in and how glorious was his death coming in the midst of war."

The answer Fedorowicz provided to these questions was that if one had to ask them, the cause the Captain had risked his life for was lost.

"He was for real, a man of flesh and blood, a truth teller above propaganda, a humanist above political concern," was how Ignatz caricatured the captain's war career, leaving it to Brian and Rob to consult Wikipedia for the relevant timeline. Captain Pilecki was a true hero, which in Ignatz Fedorowicz' estimation meant somebody whose deeds needed no elucidation let alone justification.

That olive drab Humvee that the two had driven up in used more gas than did Fedorowicz' tractor which was never built with long distance travel in mind. Staring at such profligacy, Ignatz didn't understand why the pair was lingering over the corpse of one of Polish history's true heroes. For an American, all history had been forgotten while within the boundaries of the American Age. This was according to such a learned scholar as George W. Bush. Ignatz didn't understand why this wasn't known by them in advance. To the man who knows exactly where he's going there's no need whatsoever to consult his rearview mirror. They could educate themselves about Pilecki on their own, he thought, independent of his instruction. But such education was irrelevant in the face of their present actions. Ignatz realized what their presence in this place was really for. He like all his neighbors had seen the American convoys speeding by on the dirt road at all hours of the night up to the black site. In the trucks' containers, through the portholes could be viewed bits of the orange jumpsuits so synonymous these days with the prisoners of Guantanamo Bay. He assumed this was a show for the benefit of locals.

Occasionally a barrel of an M-1 rifle also was in sight, and once a thin brown arm that had managed temporarily to slip loose from the plastic ties that had constrained the arm. In this instance the arm wasn't or didn't seem to be waving for help so much as attempting to experience a little bit of the freedom that the rest of

its body had been denied at the moment. Eventually it would slip back inside the compartment and likely back into the plastic tie.

The mind that directed the arm hadn't been informed of his rights in this situation. This was likely because these rights had been completely denied or held in abeyance. Humane treatment would not flow from those who felt it proper to deny these basic rights. It was axiomatic that those who were classified as animals would be treated like animals during their maintenance phase of their internment. It was only logical that human rights should only be extended toward human beings. But Americans being Americans never formulated the situation in terms that stark. Like the Nazis before them, they were too busy doing the Lord's work to consider their behavior objectively. They thought of themselves as saved, therefore independent of self-examination. Whatever they did was for the best.

Ignatz Fedorowicz began to recount for the two Americans Wiltold Pilecki's daring escape from what was then the Auschwitz prisoner of war camp in the summer of 1943. The gas chambers were in place by then constructed in the winter of that year by slave labor between crematoria one and two. The sterilization program run by Dr. Joseph Mengele was in full swing by then. The camp's first victims were the Jews of Warsaw many of whom Pilecki had grown up with.

The Joy Division t-shirt that Fedorowicz was wearing as he spoke of such matters rode up on his belly as he began to gesticulate with a gathering force.

"*Robactwo*," he said to Rob George, who might well have been singled out for more charitable treatment by Ignatz had he revealed his real purpose in Poland. Ignatz pointed to one particularly daunting Tatra peak in the dimming distance. Some magical transformation had happened on this summit apparently, something deeply charming from which a local folktale could be derived. An Eastern European equivalent of Abraham's binding of Isaac perhaps. Fedorowicz likely knew the story, but he couldn't be called upon to provide the information to Rob. He had enough of him and Sane and their

disrespectful loopy behavior while in the presence of Captain Pilecki's corpse.

The notion was put forward by Ignatz that one was always either Abraham or Isaac. That is, the scarifier or the sacrificed. History seldom allowed for a third alternative, certainly not in this age. Which made both men's obliviousness to such truths all the more disgusting in Ignatz Fedorowicz' eyes.

The Joy Division t-shirt he wore had been smuggled in by his son Jan from across the German border in the magical year of 1991 when all things seemed possible and an American presence in Eastern Europe was strictly limited to the rock music both father and son enjoyed when dedicated to all matters farming and the on-going care and glorification of Captain Witold Pilecki.

There was a contraption out back of the house barely visible from this angle that might well have been a broken washing machine.

"I'm gonna find me a cup and sip," Brian Sane told Rob George believing in his presently altered state that what was before him at the moment was an old-fashioned Kentucky still. It was his conjecture that the locals out here were not equipped with firearms. A happy lingering effect of the Communist government, you see. They were powerless against a willful American with a sidearm of his own. They wouldn't dare try and stop him.

II.

Knowing enough about their surroundings to fear an independent local press, the commandant of this black site had disguised its exterior as a private test lab for various rat poisons. He slapped bio-hazard signs in Polish and Slovenian at three-hundred-yard intervals on the last narrow mile that led to the camp.

"*Bądźcie ostrożni, bójcie się, bądźcie uprzedzeni*" read the sign at the facility's entrance decorated with a skull and crossbones to make it all the fiercer. Be wary, be afraid, be forewarned. Hard to say who this bit of negative advertising was aimed at considering no civilian

had ever made it this far. The commandant wanted to perform due diligence in preserving the illusion of what went on here. This was what the CIA was good at, the deceiving and intimidating of non-participants. With this signage they were simply trying to maximize where their strengths resided. As much work had gone into the deceiving and intimidating likely as the facility's real purpose, the forced revelation of "truth." They were flailing around at the moment using many of the techniques pioneered by Sid Gottschalk in the nineteen fifties. Still alive in the early 2000s when the black site came online, strangely Sidney hadn't been consulted concerning the techniques of "enhanced interrogation" being applied. Strange that they hadn't, but they felt the need to make a break from their morally dubious past. They were trying to gloss over the obvious lineage from Project MKULTRA to the waterboarding practices of the early twenty-first century. They had electrodes set up connected to car batteries and various hallucinogenic substances at the ready if needed. Presently they preferred torture and suffering as methods of coercion rather than drugs and hypnosis. They felt there was a bit of justice in the inflicting of pain apart from its effectiveness. They thought that the data supported this approach, but they were hardly scientific in their efforts. Unlike the Cold War years, presently there was a degree of sadism to their techniques. They thought the American people were owed a judicious bit of bloodshed as recompense for 9/11. They felt a revulsion for their enemy beyond ideology or effective police procedure.

Out here they had morphed into a bunch of mad dogs empty of a real governing notion about how to accomplish the unstated goal of these facilities. Which was to bleed information from those terror suspects who wouldn't otherwise provide an inquisitor with any bit of useful information.

"We're so glad to see you've arrived in one piece," Sane's boss Von Hexall told Rob George after meeting him in what passed for a parking area at this compound on the other side of a corrugated fence. There was no pavement here as might have been expected in a facility designed to project imperial power. Merely, there was a

damp patch that somebody had taken a weed whacker to upon arrival and drenched the dirt below with herbicide to keep the maintenance to a minimum.

The entire compound had the same provisional feel to it as if it was constructed over the course of a few weeks. The Quonset huts, for example, lacked tie-downs. These would have minimized damage when violent weather struck. Pieces of building equipment were strewn around the area. There was not a single sign on any building's exterior that denoted its use.

The entire compound had the feel of a temporary encampment rather than a permanent base. Perhaps this signified that its mission scope was limited. Or maybe they were merely paranoid. They thought that they were destined to relocate soon. This was to escape notice of the local authorities.

Hexall had assumed the friendly quality of a summer camp director. His desire was to present himself as menacing to the rare stranger in his midst.

"We can tell you anything you want to know within a de-classified spectrum," he said to Rob who of late was having problems staying on his feet. Whatever the drug was that Sane had slipped into his drink had a secondary effect. It affected the motor functions as well as perception. It was working its way down his brain stem apparently. Which meant eventually he would have trouble breathing. He would have to lie down and ask somebody for help. This meant he was as good as dead given his present company. He would have been better off asking for help from a pack of hyenas then any of the officers at this black site. It would do no good to claim he was a citizen of the United States and entitled to aid from a U.S. government official.

Von Hexall, who had been given his first name from his celebrated (within the intelligence community) father due to his facial resemblance to a famous jowly Nazi scientist whose acquaintance it was Joachim's displeasure to make, possessed the bizarre ability to talk and smile at the same time.

"Anywhere you want to go," he said to Rob declining to finish the sentence. It seemed to him that the sentiment he meant to articulate had already been

expressed. He thought he was laying it on a little thick. He knew Rob George was too addled now to take the bait fully. He knew him from his dossier which showed that he was in possession of enough intelligence and awareness to have been properly appalled by this offer.

Actually, Rob George had already seen far too much to have been left to his own devices. A supposed confidant of Dr. Gottschalk, he had likely already known too much even before he had come to Poland. So, in the very matter of fact way that the CIA had honed over decades, arrangements were made to bring Rob George into the fold. It hadn't been decided what they would do with him once he was here, but they were determined to bring him here regardless. Inspiration would strike once the barbed wire gate swung shut behind him.

Not that Hexall would ever act on his own (though this had been the guidance he had received from Langley). He felt, however, the quicker a decision was reached, the easier it would be for all parties concerned. With George, a proper interrogation was beside the point. They already knew what he knew. Which was the problem. They needed him to shut up rather than start blabbing. In civilian life they could have gotten him to sign a confidentiality agreement. In this context the analog to a confidentiality agreement was a bullet to the back of the head. Presently, Von Hexall might as well have flipped a coin. He thought Rob George's ensuing actions might decide his fate for him. Rob needed to be on his best behavior here. Too bad he was blind to this truth. Too bad for him he was having trouble standing up straight and speaking in complete sentences.

Von wanted to be friendly with Rob if only because he felt it would serve as a backhanded warning. It was only sporting to let him know that he was in some kind of trouble. Here in the middle of nowhere it was only sporting to make him aware that a greater oblivion awaited him as recompense for a false step taken.

"It's amazing how you found out about us," Hexall told Rob knowing such information had likely been obtained in the usual manner through cunning, blackmail, and deceit. Nothing amazing about that given the company Rob was keeping. But he seemed soft to

Von and needed to be flattered. If only to eliminate the urge to run and hide, he needed to be flattered. When it was your intention to kill a man the worst that you could do is to reveal yourself as his enemy.

Von Hexall wondered after the location of George's overnight bags. Well of course a stay overnight had not been negotiated in advance, reflecting the power structure's indecisiveness about his fate, but maybe this had been Rob's plan all along. An overnight bag would have just raised the minor inconvenience of having to get rid of it if they had decided to be proactive in their defense of government secrets. Again, they were the experts at performing such disposals. But it was interesting that at the very least nobody had taken the issue into consideration.

Sane and George had been witnessed drinking together and traversing the two hundred miles from Warsaw in an American vehicle.

"You can see how we've treated you," Von Hexall said. "Think about it long enough to realize we have nothing to hide."

To Von all these niggling details argued against a bullet in the head. At least in the here and now. They could bug Rob's phone and hack his computer and reencounter him anytime they liked.

On the other hand, according to his dossier, George was years on this investigation that had once been a straightforward Sid Gottschalk biography. He would know enough to take security countermeasures. So, from Hexall's perspective, the Company was on the horns of a dilemma. They had given him permission to do as he saw fit with Rob, but this didn't entail (he assumed) an injudicious method of disposal for him.

Let him leave. They would closely observe. But once he crossed the Polish border, he was removed from Von's sphere of influence. And the current political landscape was not yet safe (he assumed) for the murder of a US journalist on US soil. Perhaps within five years such procedures would be routine. For now the Company needed to be clever about such matters. They needed to ascertain exactly what it was Rob was in the midst of

accusing them of. They needed to take steps to defend themselves in advance of any official inquiry.

A thin moan emerged from the interior of Hut C twenty yards off the parking lot. This was explained by Von as the start of the *ẓuhr* prayer.

"We're up on such things nowadays," he said to Rob George and put his right hand on Rob's left shoulder. "We know all the names for things. Just as if we're believers ourselves. We have everything covered really as you might expect we would," he said. "Out here, we specialize in humane treatment with a difference. We know our boundaries and the boundaries dictated by international law. We're not in the mood to create an international incident. We're in a war that we're winning. You should know this and record it for posterity. We don't feel prisoner abuse is in our best interests. We don't torture. We interrogate robustly, forcefully but only to a point. We know what line not to cross. We're Americans with good soft hearts. We wouldn't have any idea about how to torture if we wanted to."

As objective proof of this conceit, Von told Rob, please note the fact that you have been allowed out here to begin with.

"I'm more like a camp counselor," he said to George recalling the presence of Taco Night every Thursday.

"We only have six detainees here at the moment," he told Rob George being careful to avoid the word "prisoner" which as far as he knew held a certain significance under the Geneva Convention. "So, things get lonely for us up here and we have to think of ways to amuse ourselves."

He said they had game night weekly and were getting a satellite dish to watch programs back home.

"We think of ourselves as psychologists in the midst of getting to the bottom of our detainees' psyches," he said. "We're trying a new approach here, daily," he told Rob. "We don't think of enemy combatants as enemy combatants so much as lost souls we're trying to gain information from in innovative ways."

In fact, the U.S. government pointedly refused to recognize those that had been captured on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan as "enemy

combatants." This black site, whose existence was denied by the American government, was in violation of international law which called for proactive monitoring of all POW facilities. It was a dark, secret place absent of checks and balances or legal restraint of any kind. Both its presence and procedures had never been examined by any American government lawyer. It was off the grid morally. Just like a Peter Pan dreamscape.

Those who ran this facility and those like it were not by and large men capable of an ironic mode of self-analysis. Those high up in the CIA knew what they were doing when they staffed these sites with redneck jocks, paramilitary operatives, and careerist sycophants. They didn't want a staff capable of developing a political consciousness. That would be a fire that would burn for consecutive decades. They wanted people who didn't know from The Golden Rule. Or if they knew The Golden Rule didn't give a shit about it. Morality was for those with trust funds and daddy's lawyers on speed dial. This was a war footing they were struggling to maintain. The Company wanted folks who didn't care how things felt to them at night once beta consciousness descended and thoughts flowed to dreams and were inspected by the unconscious mind one by one for their consistency.

Of the six detainees, Von said to Rob, who had of late and in a stumblebum fashion removed notepad and pen from a vest pocket, four were native Iraqis gone over to the dark side once the American invasion had proceeded in earnest, and two were Pashtuns picked up along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border for who knew what crimes against the temporary government in Kabul.

"We're merely trying to establish a set of facts," Von said to Rob George explaining their presence in Poland. "We're not really interested in meting out justice," he said. "We're trying to get to the bottom of things merely," he said. "Out here we take orders and issue reports. That's all. We don't ask how any of our guests had come to be at our doorstep to begin with."

Guests.

According to Von Hexall, tongues tended to loosen when individuals were simply transported from their

native countries where anti-American support systems existed.

“You’re wanting to see them, I’m guessing,” he told Rob before commenting politely on Rob’s shambolic state.

He told Rob that if he wanted there was a spare bunk in the staff quarters for him. “Just for a little while,” he said to him. “An hour or two at the most,” he said, “and then you’ll see how clear your head is after that. It don’t bother me if you leave early,” he said to Rob.

“This isn’t a hotel,” he said. “But, then again, it’s no bother to any of us what you do if all you do is ask questions. The actual questioning of prisoners I’m afraid is the only thing that’s been disallowed. We see your visit as helpful to our efforts,” he said. “We see that we have nothing to hide. From you or anybody else for that matter who happened to come our way.”

These last two sentences spoken by Hexall were of course patently false sentiments. He said them anyway as he was dedicated to deceiving Rob if ever so slightly. He wanted to forestall the need for having to kill Rob while on site and thus create a minor series of nuisances regarding the body’s disposal and the providing of false testimony as to what had happened to Rob once he left Warsaw in the official Humvee.

In Hexall’s opinion, Rob George and all those like him were septic vermin who could only serve the public interest as compost for a farm’s crops.

“They’re all like that I’m guessing,” Von said to his chief interrogator, Violetta Yang, minutes after departing from Rob’s site in the parking lot. “They’re all like headstrong and believing in themselves as the purveyors of all truth. They don’t have souls or a conscience like you and me,” he said referring to the press in general “They’re vampire-like creatures out for blood. The facts of a given situation won’t dissuade them even a little,” he said. “If the facts don’t support their original contention, they create a new set of facts that will,” he said. “There’s no massaging them in any direction, not anymore. They’re political activists more than seekers after truth. This has been a big change in society over the past forty years, post-Watergate. They think of

themselves as white knights on horseback but they're just so much human garbage. They're just not people you can deal with reasonably. Not anymore. The old days of accommodation via leaks and off the record quotes are long gone."

So it was that Von recalled for Violetta the recent Al Jazeera report on a CIA detention facility in Afghanistan where no American official had ever been approached for an interview. Instead, one was treated to two minutes of grainy smuggled footage of naked prisoners reclined on stained concrete floors. Were they directed to strip to create a better visual? Impossible to say for a viewer at home and even an insider like Von Hexall. Only the Al Jazeera maggot could say for sure. The report was completely lacking in context. There was an assurance made that supreme wrongdoing was on-going by American forces. But they had elided the need to provide objective evidence that supported this contention.

Nowadays there was no such thing as fair mindedness when it came to documenting the war on terror. Hexall realized Rob George as an enemy of the CIA long before he had the time to meet him. He saw him as somebody devoid of patriotic impulses utterly and thus beyond his influencing in any reason-based way.

"It's just the way it is nowadays with them, a bit of black and white and nothing in between," he said to Violetta Yang who had turned to the bank of video monitors on Hexall's office wall. Rob George was there in one of them fighting mightily against the need to sleep. He wasn't a person entirely devoid of drive or toughness. But this didn't make him somebody worth keeping alive.

So it was that Von Hexall recalled his dad's dealing with the media during the tumultuous year of 1974 when it seemed the entire apparatus of the Central Intelligence Agency might be dismantled and those within its structure who were judged as especially heinous arrested and prosecuted.

"They all thought they were Woodward and Bernstein," Von said to Violette recalling the anguished yet circumscribed dinnertime conversations held at that time when Von was still in high school. "They all started in with the blackmail angle of theirs which was that they

would treat dad favorably in exchange for information. The government behind the government, you might say. Like fucking mafiosi only you'd have to substitute the word *information* for the word *money*. They thought of themselves as tough guys in those days, privileged like they were in some huge position of power. Maybe they were back then, but it's hard for me to recall with clarity. Maybe in this case the perception of power was power. Any politician they caught with his dick out, I know, they hounded to the grave. I remember dad being legitimately upset about their presence at Langley. He thought they wouldn't stop until they had any number of scalps on the wall."

In Von's estimation, Rob George was no better, no worse than these previously alluded to demons. This was with the relevant qualifier that he needed to be given credit for making it this far while so many of his colleagues are still out in the cold.

"Jim Kane gave him the clearance originally," Von told Violette anticipating her next question. Why he did this was anybody's guess, Hexall said. But logic dictated that he was simply trying to do away with an annoyance in the most expeditious way imaginable. "I think he leaked something to him at one point," he said to Violette about Jim, "in the hopes that he would only go as far as he wanted him to go. Bad decision," he said. "Obviously it was like a shark tasting blood. He wouldn't stop after that, wouldn't shut things down regardless of how much elbow grease was placed behind the threat. Kane assumed once on Polish soil he would be ours to do with as we saw fit. Which is true in a sense. But it shouldn't imply that I personally have free reign. Jim likely cultivated this journalist just like he would with an agent overseas. He likely created a breadcrumb trail for him stating 'I'm heading to such and such a destination and blah blah blah.' If given an order to terminate, a minor annoyance can be overcome easily. But thus far the order has not yet come through."

The reason Von Hexall would not kill Rob George at least on site was that there were too many loose ends to have to retie afterwards if he did. The only reason he

would wind up killing him on site was that it was the eminently logical thing to do.

"How is 3-01569 coming?" Hexall asked Violette Yang, citing the catalog number of the highest value target presently on campus. He was a former Baghdad cab driver that one day had been observed giving a ride to one of Abu Musab al Zarqawi's advisors.

Realize, the Al Qaeda affiliate in Iraq wasn't that sort of organization that would contract strangers off the street for logistical support. Not that they had any hard intelligence that supported this contention, but it was logical to assume that anybody that did any sort of business with any layer of the organization had been at the very least pre-screened for their political sympathies.

"He keeps on declaring his innocence," Violetta told Von Hexall in that breathy way of hers that made it seem that she was in the midst of a poorly executed Marilyn Monroe impersonation. "Doesn't seem to understand where he is at the minute. Doesn't seem to know that the game's up and he won't be allowed to leave ever. We've told him about his situation constantly, but he doesn't seem to want to listen. He doesn't want to internalize where he is. We gave him a view of the mountains and took him on a hike once to have a looksee. But to him we're still on the streets of Baghdad."

3-01569 had a wife and three children stashed away somewhere that he kept holding up to Violetta as a cause to show mercy towards him. This was a very odd tactic to adopt for an Al Qaeda operative admittedly and it had been noted as such by Violetta on the Company's internal listserv. It smacked of tradecraft to her, of an approach that was learned rather than individually created. It was hard to say how this new strategy should be interpreted by interrogators. Likely it meant the Iraqi branch of Al Qaeda was settling in for the long haul. They had anticipated CIA interrogation sites just like this and were providing operatives with a script. Under extreme duress it was easier for them to say, "I have a wife and children" than "I have no knowledge of such and such an operation." Whereas the latter might be an outright lie, the former was merely changing the subject. Also, they

were appealing to the interrogator's humanity which was what all CIA operatives were counseled to do if captured. The idea was to attempt to develop a degree of affinity with the torturer. If one could talk, one might as well insist on one's own humanity. Such insistence made one all the harder to kill supposedly. It made the provider of torture supposedly hesitate once the order was given to terminate.

Violetta Yang could not understand how Al Qaeda could know of the existence of such sites. It was shocking. But, on the other hand, an officer should never be surprised at the cleverness of her enemy.

"We've thought all this through as much as we could," she said to Von Hexall by way of an explanation concerning 3-01569's curious behavior in the interrogation room. With George settled down for an involuntary nap, the output from the bank of monitors had lost interest for her temporarily. She assumed at some point he would rise and begin an impromptu inspection of the facilities on his own. Up until then she wasn't obliged to consider him.

Probably there would be similar mysteries that she and her fellow interrogators would have to confront through the ensuing years when this program was operational. They couldn't really anticipate every curveball that came their way tossed by an enemy who was far more intellectually capable than their religious zealotry might suggest they would be. This wasn't an academic exercise, and she couldn't anticipate the level of duress—emotional and cognitive—that she would be placed under when performing the approved EITs on the captives. Witnessing the EITs gave her nightmares. Which was surprising given that during waking hours she detected no duress in either their consideration or their execution. It was all in a day's work so to speak. Even though the hidden part of her brain was telling her something different. The tortured always insisted on their own humanity regardless of how vile, religiously dogmatic, or valiantly stoic they became when being tortured. Violetta could never distance herself emotionally from the procedure. Which was to say distance herself from the suffering she was inflicting on

them as they choked and gasped, were taken past the point of consciousness, then were summarily revived for the cycle to start anew any number of minutes later.

She thought them impressive in a way even as she was trying to extract actionable information from them in the same way as clam meat was extracted from a clamshell. Most of them realized what was going to happen to them before they entered the room. They had made intellectual preparations for the ordeal. They mouthed prayers just before their waterboarding or attempted a deep breath in which resulted in the operator delaying the pouring of water until the moment of exhalation. Sometimes they tried to make a run for it and were dragged back onto the table in a few seconds. At times like these it was permissible to use violence to subdue them. Violetta Yang favored the omnipresent Taser hanging from her belt loop. Simply she felt they would lose any respect for her if she punched them in the face and it didn't hurt as much as a man's punch might. She was totally conscious of her gender throughout these interrogations. To a man, the prisoners looked at her with a special hatred that suggested they might talk just to gain the minor freedom that would allow them to kill her just before they were set upon in turn and killed.

It could be the reason why she had been chosen to come here. Violetta had never really looked too deeply into the reason. She reasoned it wouldn't have made any difference about the business of the day. Her confidence would have been shaken greatly if her own motivation was revealed to her. In such an eventuality she would have been constantly reaching for the Taser. She would have assumed a violent confrontation was imminent. Such suspiciousness would have poisoned her relationships with her fellow case officers, many of whom wouldn't have known about the reason for her anxiety.

Working at the CIA created a sense of enforced paranoia in one regardless of one's predilection for the obsessive contemplation of conspiracies.

"We're never gonna get to the bottom of it," Violetta Yang said to Brian Sane when seeing Brian emerge an hour later from the Humvee's back after an extended

nap. His hair was entirely compressed on the side he had slept on as if it had been saturated in hairspray to make it stay that way. He was utterly lacking in self-consciousness about his physical appearance. It could be days on end before he would decide to comb his hair.

He was unkempt because he was insolent. He didn't for the life of him know whom he was supposed to be impressing out here. He might as well have been a ghost for all the importance he placed on his physical shell. He liked his body fine for dealing out ass whippings to Muslims. Other than this it seemed to hold no value for him.

3-01569's continued protestations of innocence caused Violetta's analytical mind to go into spasm. Jihadists never claimed they were innocent, if only because they were so proud of their participation in jihad. They had wanted to let you know who they were and what they stood for. It was an honor for them to be in the clutches of American forces. It was a further honor to have been transplanted into this East European purgatory to await further processing at the hands of evil men.

God would provide all manner of mercy for the pious. Unlike in the secular West the notion of the warrior and the religious suppliant were entirely fused in Islam. Unlike in the West there was no sense that shame might be brought upon both a God and a People who were absolutely committed to obtaining salvation through savage ends.

Violetta thought maybe Brian Sane would have some insight to share about the prisoner as he was the last interrogator to work the detainee over, using his own freelance methods.

"The possibility must occur to us," Sane said to her, "as soldiers on the front lines of the War for civilization, that we in the intelligence community are something less than the sober angels we advertise ourselves to be."

"You're saying he's the actual person he's been claiming to be," Violetta Yang said. "You're saying he had no other reason to lie at this point. He's telling the truth because that's the only version of events he has recourse to. You're saying he's not knowledgeable

enough to lie. That he possesses no tradecraft. And I'm supposed to feel sorry about what I've done to him."

There was a bit of ash in Brian Sane's teeth. He felt the need to spit it out before answering.

"Basically, yes," he told her.

Sane began to vomit onto the Humvee's floor. Couldn't help it obviously. A bit of ash had made it into his innards. Something was irregular in his physical processes. He didn't know how it could be corrected.

It likely wouldn't be corrected. As out here in the middle of nowhere an object once broken tended to stay broken. Absent of civilization's bounty, service support machines rotted rather than malfunctioned. They generally were disposed of rather than repaired. On the road up here in the ditch that doubled as a parking lot various dead machines had been strewn with a strange frequency. There was nothing pristine about this place. Which might have been why it was chosen to host a black site.

Not a lot of tourist traffic was moving through the foothills of this part of the Tatras. This was Polack Appalachia. Its single selling point was that it was completely remote. Even the locals realized this as a place that one escaped from rather retreated to. Nobody came here on their own recognizance unless they had something to hide. That was why the site's presence had been so conspicuous. The natives understood what it was immediately. They understood that there was no other possibility for its use but a black site. The span of vehicles with foreign plates driving to and from the building confirmed that this was so.

Violetta Yang was not a moralist. So, despite her progress with 3-01569, she was wondering if she was in over her head.

"Sometimes at night he comes to me with that same look that he wears when sleeping under that barn," Violetta Yang told the camp's morale officer, T.H. Hoffmann. She was speaking not of one of her colleagues put of Captain Pilecki, or at least of his ghost.

Violetta was talking to T.H. in the hut that had been designated as a site canteen. Daily the torturers would convene in the canteen. There they would blow off

steam, get drunk, or simply deny the existence of the world outside if only momentarily. Six months on, six months off was the agreed-upon schedule for detainment camp officers like Violetta Yang. She was just entering her fifth month. To her it seemed like three and a half years. She had aged ungracefully in her time spent here. Since the arrival of 3-01569, she began to question her choice of careers.

Witold Pilecki, who Violetta had had to research prior to discovering his historical significance, was always with her at night. He would arrive dressed in his army uniform with the same row of medals she had witnessed on his corpse. Upon her arrival from Washington, Violetta had been escorted to the attraction by Von Hexall. He had insisted they stop and take a peek at the shrine. If only because sightseeing was massively discouraged by the Company once a case officer had encountered official duty.

“To the modern Pole, he’s more or less a non-entity,” Von had noted to Violetta Yang about Pilecki. He was dabbing at a fissure in the captain’s left cheek with the tip of a ballpoint pen.

“We remember him, you and I do,” he said, “because it’s the only attraction along the way. I’m not much for a journey down memory lane. My dad was a hero in WWII and never spoke to me of it,” he told her. “He spoke of nothing of the horror. It’s unseemly to start recalling history as if you were part of it,” he said. “You didn’t know this man,” he told her pointing at the corpse. “You aren’t like him and are ignorant of his true motives. In sixty years, rest assured, there will be no shrines built to the interrogators of the CIA. Even at Langley, I suppose, they’ll have forgotten all about us and these sites. They’re embarrassed by us. Or nervous about the potential liability we represent to them. Unlike with some of dad’s projects they’re not making the mistake of keeping official records. There’ll be no cover-up work necessary if a new regime decides to prosecute. There’s nothing, no names or addresses linked to Eastern Europe. The Polish police know more about us than the Bush Administration. Nobody’s gonna have to lie on our account to keep us out of jail.”

Pilecki when alive was a promoter of both Polish nationalism and the universal dignity of man. Thus, it was hard to say why that—outside of Israel—he had been so disregarded by those in whose best interests it might be to remember.

“He comes to my room where I lay dreaming of him,” Violetta said to Hoffmann who in addition to his many other accolades possessed a PhD in psychology. “And he stares. Doesn’t accuse or forgive or question why I’m here,” she said. “He sits on the edge of my bed and stares. Maybe waiting for me to make the mistake of running away. Because once I tried to run he could find me and catch me. If I showed fear I would be demonstrating my guilt. That’s what it means,” she said. “It’s all a test to see how guilty I am. Someday I’ll get up and run and that’ll be it. I’ll enter another layer of dreams from which it’s impossible to awake. And nobody will remember that I was alive to begin with.”

One of the most disturbing things that went on in these sessions for Violetta was the tendency of the prisoner to try and ingratiate himself with his torturer by singing American songs in between desperate breaths.

“He’s trying to get on our good side,” she said to Hoffmann of 3-01569. She stared over at the art table T.H. had set up for those so interested in painting or working with clay in their off hours. He had all the supplies shipped in from Dresden, Germany where there was this high-quality artists’ clay in mass supply. Only the best for the best and all that. As T.H. Hoffmann saw it, his job was to keep up morale amongst those who labored so hard on freedom’s behalf. He had no intention of cheating anybody in this regard. He was as conscientious as they came about what he did. A month from now there would be a computer lab up and running with fully loaded PowerMacs that personnel could use at their leisure. They could do whatever they wanted when they wanted. Hoffmann wasn’t going to hold it against anybody how many hours they spent online. He didn’t think it was any of his business, really.

The point that she was making about 3-01569’s behavior was that in his eyes his interrogators were the barbarians, the lunatics, the terrorists so called. He was

merely attempting to drill down to some layer of shared humanity in order to stay alive. Trained to be able to interpret a suspect's thoughts, to see through his eyes, Violetta was appalled to observe her psychopathy staring back at her. According to 3-01569, she was in possession of a type of crazy that any reasoning person would see as evil. She couldn't understand how 3-01569 could arrive at this conclusion. Owing to the terrorist affiliations he was alleged to have, she couldn't see why he thought she was the aggressor. At the very least membership in Al Qaeda should have made one lenient about the transgressions of others. But 3-01569's behavior pointed to the conclusion that he was terrified, disgusted, and appalled by his captors. He was repulsed by them to the point that it seemed logical he would give them what they required if only to forestall having to be in their presence a minute longer than necessary. But somehow the actionable information never flowed. 3-01569 was ever a man with toes dangling over a precipice. It either must have been complete anguish for him or he was that sort of unprecedented genius of resistance that signaled a new level of enhanced interrogation was required. He seemed for all the world to believe in his own innocence while his captors indicted themselves by their own continuously uncivilized treatment of him. Two sessions more and Violetta Yang would be down on her knees apologizing to him for all the grief she had caused him. She would help him escape perhaps. He was either that good or they were that bad. With her, the healing concept of believing herself as but a cog in a machine absolved of moral responsibility had not yet been fully mastered. This degree of compartmentalization required further counselling on the part of Hoffmann. Also, the ghost of Witold Pilecki would have to be appeased.

Ignatz Fedorowicz, the shrine's owner, would appear in the dreams too from time to time. Always he was clad in the same Joy Division t-shirt that he had been wearing this afternoon. Emerging from some indeterminate place (this was a dream after all), he would walk slowly towards the captain. He would be making a cut slit sign constantly across his hairy throat with two fingers. He

never spoke in the dreams. It was always this way, the cut sign across the throat and the walking. Somehow, he never managed to come close enough to touch Violetta. Another person or the intercession of waking consciousness would transpire before he came close. She never got to ask the caretaker what he meant by any of this.

According to Hoffmann—though lord knew how he had acquired this information—the cut sign was the gesture peasants of the area would universally make to the human cattle on trains as they passed by hand tilled fields unto the concentration camps.

“They wanted them to know their fate,” he said to Violetta noting that Belzec extermination camp was less than twenty miles from the black site. It was accessible by taking the dirt road to its very end.

“They themselves were not Jew-lovers by any stretch of the imagination,” he said. “They wanted the Jews on the trains to know their fate in the camps. They could see the smoke from the crematoria daily,” he said. They used the ash of human remains as fertilizer for the next year’s barley.”

Hoffmann wanted a cigarette. Eventually he thought Violetta would tire of his presence and then he could go outside and smoke. Even here amid so much malfeasance there was a proscription against lighting up inside. Preposterous as it was, he’d have no defense for himself if he had been caught in the act.

“They could see the trains coming in only one direction,” he said of those peasants in the field during WW II. “They didn’t need a tour of the German facility to know what was taking place. They had information to share and were eager to share it. It wasn’t all mean-spirited taunting, you’d figure, despite their antipathy to the Jews. As there was a release gained in the certainty of knowing. Supposedly.”

Over time spent in this part of Poland, the Holocaust had increasingly taken center stage in T.H. Hoffmann’s dreams too. Perhaps it had something to do with the massive ash fall from the crematoria during that period. It seeded the earth irrevocably with the spirits of the dead. So much so that the mere act of walking outside

was a type of revisiting. Invariably it would be imprinted on the unconscious. Well, maybe the symmetry of one sort of Polish encampment and the American encampment near it was too obvious for even ahistorical Americans to ignore. T.H. Hoffmann was at pains to elucidate the differences to Violetta. But this very explanation assured that the dreams would be haunted by memories of nightmares past in Poland. He knew this to be the case but spoke of it anyway. There was only so much he could do for her and her fellow case officers. There was only so much he was willing to do regardless.

In the next Quonset hut over, the familiar moans of the four prisoners who were stored there in separate cells were nearly inaudible to Violetta Yang and T.H. Hoffmann, so familiar with the noise that it had completely faded into the background for them. An outsider like Rob George would have needed to be present just then to point it out to them but he was nowhere nearby. According to T.H., within the last few minutes the decision had been made to kill George. It would be done in a discreet manner via a massive injection of heroin. They would shoot him up and drive him back to his hotel in Warsaw. Already the room was littered with syringes and the accoutrements of the habit. They would deposit him in the hotel and deactivate the phone so he couldn’t call an emergency number. His computer was already hacked and any bit of compromising information therein would be deleted. According to Von Hexall, this was the direction that they were trending towards with Rob George all along. All that remained would be for them to collectively misremember the exact time he was here. They would need to be clear of his presence for several hours before plausible denial could be established. And that would be that. It had already been decided that his book on Gottschalk would not move forward. They didn’t believe it helped their cause. They didn’t want any hand wringing over these black sites. They understood their vulnerability in the light of any tell all book. They understood that silence was golden in the spy game.

Brian Sane would be doing the honors. So, except for her own (weirdly) encroaching conscience, Violetta Yang wouldn't have the need to linger over Rob's fate.

"It's sacrifice upon sacrifice out here," Hoffmann told her then took a bit of clay in hand. He didn't know precisely what shape it would be formed into. He wasn't that artistically gifted that he could imagine anything along those lines in advance.

Maybe a becalmed tiger of the sort William Blake drew in his *Songs of Experience*. This was what he was capable of as an artist, regardless of the excellence of the clay in his possession. He wasn't a sculptor a la Michelangelo who could imagine a figure in a block of marble and simply chip away at the excess until it emerged. Because of his limitations the clay would need to develop organically. Its flaws determined what it finally became. He had no real say in the matter.

Violetta Yang hated everything to do with art. Simply, it was because of this lack of total realness. To her there was no reason to depart from objective reality. She felt such fancifulness only got people into trouble. She felt they were trying to play God.

You drew a horse, for example, and it became a horse. Which was not to say a *real* horse but some concretized image of a feeling of such. Which was utterly fleeting. It was just a fleeting thought that had neither antecedent nor record. It appeared and vanished from feeling just like a dream.

Violetta thought that the purpose of art was to establish that men were fundamentally higher than apes. Men drew pictures, apes threw shit. She had left the liberal arts department behind long ago.

The CIA's mute Negro mascot Henry Worthington, who's seventy-seventh birthday was just observed on base yesterday soon made an appearance into Hoffmann's art room. He took up his familiar brush and palette as a type of sword and shield.

"If I were you," T.H. Hoffmann told Violetta Yang as a bit of unsolicited advice, "I'd start dosing on phenobarbital at night. This is supposed to give you dreamless sleep for hours. Eventually you stop considering them entirely. Other people speak of their

dreams and you're at a loss to know exactly of what they speak."

He didn't have any Phenobarbital on him now. But, of course, in the service of the American Empire there were ways around such scarcity. Especially in such a compliant place as the span of a suppliant Eastern Europe.

On Phenobarbital, a man went to bed and slept like the dead. It's a dreamless sleep experienced as a span of maybe two minutes at the most. A man didn't worry about his second self in such an instance. The second self vanished while on Phenobarbital.

T.H. Hoffmann thought the solution was self-evident. Its moral implications, the evils of drug abuse, Violetta should not tarry over even slightly. Drugs were bad for the body but good for the soul. Maybe she would wind up killing herself by drug overdose. He really thought Violetta was being overdramatic. He really thought that this was much ado about nothing.

From out of the corner of one all-seeing eye Hoffmann observed a presently sentient Rob George standing on tiptoe in the muck. He was attempting to get a proper look inside.

"It's the spitting image, really. Isn't it dear?" T.H. said to Henry Worthington as a crematoria was constructed in torpid shades of red-black. All that was missing presently from Henry's painting was the dream-giving ash. To make the picture realistic, that was to say. He wasn't saying that it was needed in any moral sense. He wasn't saying that he would miss it when it was used up and all the dreams of murdered Jews stopped for good.

The Wrath-bearing Tree (October 2003)

I.

The thing about chili peppers, Joe Troi told a jittery Fred Dressup, was that they're an evolutionary marvel. They're a poison to one sort of creature and food to another.

This was hours before Fred's meeting with Lafayette Publishing downtown. He was more nervous than hungry but when he was nervous, he ate. He wasn't possessed with a great deal of impulse control. His body usually did what it wanted in such situations independent of conscious thought.

"Sometimes one way, sometimes another," he told Fred slicing the Vietnamese Black Dragon Pepper to be placed on Fred's bánh mì carefully as he might using two pairs of plastic gloves. According to Joe, the fruit of the chili plant has a chemical composition that could determine what sort of creature would eat it and when. Hard to say how many centuries it took this common nightshade to obtain this level of control, but this was not to say that it was not so. The evolutionary goal was for the chili to control the dissemination of its seeds. It wanted some types of animals to eat its seeds and some merely to slink away with watery eyes and a swollen tongue. It wanted to propagate. So, this was the strategy it assumed.

With this in mind, it was hard to claim what other sort of foods or non-edible objects (or even political movements) were objectively benign and which ones stood in need of excision. If only out of a sense of self-

preservation for those doing the excising it was hard to claim which ones stood in need of excision.

“Birds don’t have capsaicin receptors in their beaks and throats,” Joe said to Fred and gently began to place each sliced piece of the black pepper carefully on top of a folded slice of capicola, as if each was a rare coin being used as payment unto a nineteenth century beadle with a sweaty palm. “To them the seeds are maybe like candy, maybe slightly sweet tasting,” he said. “For them it is the way it is. They don’t know why it is not this way with another food. Ask them all they will tell you it doesn’t taste hot. They don’t understand why even a badger would spit it out of its mouth. They feel only what their bodies make them feel. To them it’s sweet like sugar, it’s sweet maybe like Milk Duds. They’re not wrong and you’re not right. You can’t say they don’t know what they’re talking about.”

There was no getting to the bottom of it, according to Joe Troi. In this life there was no finding out the way things “really” were. Life is filtered through a nervous system which had its own agenda. The nervous system had no intention of providing unimpeachable testimony of God’s grand design. It didn’t give a shit after truth or philosophy. It didn’t know of its own existence really. So why would it give a shit after truth?

According to Joe, you couldn’t be aware of this unless you watched the nature programs that Joe watched on his satellite dish obsessively just after the team dance competitions inexplicably re-broadcast from Thailand were through. On these programs, so contrary to the American and British nature shows, there was no attempt to buffer nature’s violent tendencies with quasi-spiritual notions of Gaia. Weekly he was haunted by their reports of the at-root savagery of all of God’s creatures. He saw the implications for human affairs clearly enough. He saw what was destined to be.

Human beings watched the behavior of animals to become less like them by degrees. There were troops of Congo dwelling chimpanzees for example heavily invested in the art of the cannibal raid. The raiders liked to steal babies from the mothers of different troops and bash their heads in with a pre-selected rock. Later they

used their fingers to scoop the brains out and pass the mess around like a particularly disgusting Hawaiian poi. They were profoundly uncouth, these cannibal chimpanzee raiders. They were impelled by biology to act in this obscene manner.

As for the chili seed devouring birds, they too performed merely what nature dictated of them. They were unaware of the nature of their diets compared to other forest-dwelling creatures.

“I don’t see that we have a choice in the matter,” Joe said to Fred. This was when the topic arose about the violence being broadcast from other parts of the world into Joe’s restaurant.

“We act the way God meant for us to act,” Joe said. “No right or wrong as I see it. It all depends who’s doing the talking, man,” he said. “To them, to a Muslim, chili seeds taste like candy maybe. They have their own way of seeing things. You can’t accuse them of being hypocrites and still not be a hypocrite yourself. You can’t say they’re crazy and you’re the one that’s normal.”

On the restaurant’ TV that was perpetually tuned to CNN there was presently being related some of the more gruesome pranks of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his underlings in AQI. Over an interminable palaver of terrorist experts’ digressions, Nicholas Berg, a freelance radio-tower repairman from the suburbs of Philadelphia was being beheaded. The scene was on tape loop. FCC standards dictated that the stopping point come just before the executioner’s knife blade cut into skin. CNN was constantly playing and replaying the redacted piece, however, as if to gain some hidden understanding of events. If only for themselves, they were trying to rationalize what was seen, to fit it into their jaundiced understanding of humanity.

The masked man in the video reading the proclamation behind Nick Berg was claiming the act as retaliation for the horrors uncovered at Abu Ghraib, the military prison in Baghdad presently run by the U.S. military. He didn’t say how their prisoner was implicated in the abuses. He didn’t say if Berg under intense questioning had admitted to being an operative of the CIA.

“That’s al-Zarqawi, they say,” Joe said to Fred pointing his knife at the knife holder up on screen. “They’ve had experts on TV all day giving their theories about him,” he said. “One said he’s crazy only. One said he’s an evil genius and crazy. He doesn’t have a conscience but that’s not true or else he wouldn’t be the one holding the knife,” Joe said. “He’s not out to make friends. He’s not in it to make money.”

The pork sandwich when it finally emerged from the other side of the counter was bigger than Fred would have guessed. It was slightly mushy swimming in its juice. It was impossible to not stain one’s shirt front while eating it standing. It was the Vietnamese equivalent of a sloppy joe.

A psychotic’s vision of justice, Joe Troi said, was even more authentic because of the monomania attached to its realization.

“You can’t imagine al-Zarqawi’s mind,” he said, “just as a bird can’t imagine the mind of a badger.”

Seeing the difficulty he was having eating neatly, Joe directed Fred to the table directly behind him where various Styrofoam containers awaited. There were plastic utensils available for discerning customers. But only for discerning customers with extenuating circumstances. Recall the restaurant’s motto: *Not for pussies!* If Dressup thought the Black Dragon Pepper too strong anyway he could scram and pick each one off the ham layer one at a time on his own. This operation would not take place in Joe’s restaurant, not in a place where the hipster ethos of ironic masculinity reigned. It would be another six months before Joe Troi would notice the outflow of young men in trucker hats out to Brooklyn. For now, he was too much of a culinary star to consider the needs of his customers. They could do what they wanted once they were on their own. Within this restaurant’s confines you played by the owner’s (admittedly arbitrary) rules.

Kantian philosophy, the so-called categorical imperative, argued something completely different than Joe’s birds and badger thesis. Fred Dressup was on the verge of explaining it to Joe Troi when the sandwich’s first bite, presently in his stomach, began to have a subtle effect on its surroundings.

“Motherfucking hot,” he said to Troi. “I feel like the goddamned thing’s sprouted centipede’s legs and is trying to climb up my esophagus.”

On CNN, the faceless terrorism expert was claiming the Nick Berg beheading to be the first of many to come.

“It’s different for everybody,” Joe said to Fred without glancing his way. Twelve-hour days spent in this sandwich shop sometimes by himself left Joe with an emotional attachment to TV. For some goddamn reason CNN was the only station he would watch. *Judge Judy* was on Chanel Seven. So why not it? His patrons would have been overwhelmingly grateful if he had switched over. Nowadays nobody watched cable news for its entertainment value. Its content was gruesome, an unending tableau of sociopathic behavior. For Joe Troi cable news was a spectacular car crash that couldn’t be navigated around. If the tube broke in his shop, he would likely close early and go home and watch CNN. He thought somehow it was essential to his being that he continue to stay informed.

Sometimes people, frat boys from Fordham or NYU mostly, would come in here and eat Joe’s sandwiches ladled with Vietnamese Black Dragon Peppers three at a time. For them the peppers seemed to have no gastrointestinal affect whatsoever. Girls or the odd tourist would come down here and nibble on a ham sandwich half for ten minutes then double over in pain. Joe Troi never let clients use the toilet for the purposes of relieving themselves of the burden of one of his sandwiches. They had ordered it of their own volition. He had reasoned they should have been aware of their own constitutions in advance. It was not his fault that you’re a pussy. It was all spelled out on his chalkboard menu.

Look, get it together anyway, won’t you?

Once, in Saigon, Joe Troi had been forced into hiding in a broom closet for three weeks. In the closet he drank his own urine and ate the roaches that happened by. He had no sympathy for someone with a weak stomach. He thought the best thing he could do for cases like this would be to deny them bathroom privileges with hopes that they would toughen up in advance of some real

moment of crisis to come. They were walking roadkill in his view. Their demises would be well-deserved.

Making Troi for the asshole that his actions argued he was, Fred Dressup had no intention of asking to use Joe's head even if he had happened to crap his pants on the way over to Lafayette. He had his pride, or some Asperger's-like proximate therein. Besides by the fourth bite of the first half his innards seemed to be growing progressively acclimated. The gathering indigestion had plateaued to something that felt like he was being punched in the stomach repeatedly by a wimpy eight-year-old. The sensation did not qualify as actual pain. And it was a good sandwich. Damn good. It would have been a true insult to suggest otherwise.

Fred bought one of the phosphorescent green sodas, product of a Williamsburg artisan that the restaurant served in lieu of Coke or Pepsi and beat it out of the restaurant's front entrance with most of his sandwich resting in its Styrofoam container, an undiscovered country of heartburn and colorectal distress.

Once out on First Avenue, *Fashion Victim*'s Victoria Alshenka stopped Fred and asked him for five dollars.

"We're taking up a collection for the victims of the victims of 9/11," she said to Fred then contemplated asking him for a cigarette. This was a provocative act nowadays, but she was considering asking him anyway. Smoking was suitably retro she thought for both of their tastes. Fred could put it in his mouth and smoke it for her if he wanted. Only fair. He could light a second fag from the one dangling from his lips and gently place it onto her lips like Mary in the manger laying down her bundle of joy.

She wasn't attracted to Fred and his twitchy intensity so much as moderately fascinated by the minor disgust his presence allowed in her.

"We have a crisis in our midst," Victoria Alshenka told Fred Dressup, citing the latest 9/11 victims ad campaign wherein, with the purchase of a plastic four-inch Statue of Liberty replica, product of Shungjohn Province, China, for twenty-nine ninety five a piece, a nine dollar donation would be made to the fund benefiting the Victims' families. In her opinion the fund

drive had gone too far. It was in need of a counterbalance. She had taken it upon herself to oversee the fund herself. She felt herself particularly aggrieved and therefore entitled to do so. She was soliciting donations herself and storing them in a metal box underneath *Fashion Victim*'s counter.

The Wives of the Victims of 9/11 had just released their second cookbook, according to Victoria Alshenka. Their recipes were intercut with images of their tragically slain loved ones, culled from better times.

"*Arugula tuna noodle casserole*," Victoria quoted as if it was a kind of druid curse whose every syllable needed to be pronounced precisely if it was to work. "*Ham hocks with a maple glaze*. You put a canned pineapple slice on top of it and miniature marshmallows crowning it and then you have a meal fit for a king. It's the arugula tuna noodle casserole that I can't get over," she said. "I think that's what they feed prisoners in Gitmo nowadays in lieu of waterboarding. It's a joke of some kind. Over in New Jersey they think of it as some kind of joke."

More to the point, such products were all based on sentimentality absent of a real sense of social justice that might have lifted them out of the realm of kitsch. Presently it was the victims of the victims of 9/11 whose injuries required redressing. Its advertising was so much stars-and-stripes bullshit running night and day on the telly and the subway platforms, too. What had happened to their loved ones was only slightly sad according to Victoria Alshenka. After all, people were murdered in this city every damn day. Who's to say why the recent drive-by double homicide in Rego Park was any more tragic than the Falling Men from Tower B? It's just a matter of star power, a matter of publicity in Victoria Alshenka's mind. You were supposed to feel sad for them because their relatives died in a very high-profile manner.

The money she was collecting would be used for a 9/11 party held at her store.

"You can go as your favorite Ground Zero character," she told Fred and quickly shifted the fake plastic cold sore from the right side of her lip unto the left. She herself was planning to go as Mohammad Atta, the wax

faced Egyptian leader of Flight 11's high jacking. She had the leather jacket and the cellophane mask all picked out for the occasion. She had a copy of Microsoft's Flight Simulator X in her shopping cart on Amazon ready to be procured for entertainment purposes alone.

Maybe this was a truly bleeding edge idea, but like so many in the new and fading downtown scene, Victoria Alshenka felt the need to be innovative. Much to her delight the outgoing Giuliani Administration had already taken notice and per the usual was overreacting massively. The *NY Post* had been suckered into a vitriolic page three article. She was doing her best to be the doyen of downtown even as Sonic Youth was in the midst of breaking up. Several ex-Mouseketeers in the meantime had been spotted on the Lower East Side by Victoria stuffing their faces with kiwi lime sorbet from Il Labratorio. She couldn't imagine it could get any worse than this. She couldn't rationalize the fact that New York's downtown circa 2004 had become just another hyper-expensive neighborhood, pseudo-bohemian and charmless.

In the immortal words of Leonard Cohen, the war was over and the good guys lost. Presently, Victoria Alshenka was in the midst of striking back against the area's despoilers. She had originally eyed Fred Dressup in his tight black suit and P.F. Flyers as a potential ally in the endeavor. The plea for money was just a way of chatting him up. He looked vaguely familiar as if he was a neighborhood regular. He looked like somebody who might well have been offended by the presence of a class of professional victims who were using an attack to feather their nests exclusively far beyond what decency allowed for.

In Victoria Alshenka's eyes Fred had this weird sort of new wavy intensity to him that she found endearing even as she would have criticized it for its backward-looking nostalgia.

"I know you from something," she said to him, even as the spicy goodness of the uneaten sandwich began to announce itself in the otherwise unadorned space between them. The greater the distance Fred had put between those first few alarming bites the greater his

craving was for it. In the past few seconds, his attention had been completely drawn from Victoria and her fake plastic cold sore in favor of the exotic meal in his midst. He knew where his priorities lay. He was all about satisfying his gustatory desires. This was as opposed to indulging other people. It was all he could do to stop himself from sitting down on the pavement Indian-style and chomping down in her presence. No, she couldn't have a bite. Not with that nasty case of fake Herpes simplex she was in the midst of certainly.

In fact, several of Fred Dressup's more polished spontaneous videos were even now making the rounds of downtown art galleries as a type of VCR samizdat. Occasionally, he would be asked to speak about their meanings after they were shown, as per his strict directions via projector on a light-colored wall with a substantial plaster crack bisecting the frame.

"I had a rock band in the late eighties," Fred Dressup told her. "The name of which escapes even me at the moment."

Well, maybe. In fact, Fred's band was noteworthy only for its ignominy. Also, for the appalling noise they generated via an ensemble of four malfunctioning Theremins, and a nine-millimeter Glock semi-automatic pistol that Fred would purport to "play" at random moments when the Theremin feedback had subsided temporarily due to the vagaries of Chaos Theory which dictated that failure was inherent in every self-perpetuating system. The silence that ensued was too Zen a conceit to go over well in the post-punk environs that his band, The Faggots, was toiling within. The Glock intercession had been a masterstroke suggested by the third Theremin player, one Yop Stahm. Yop had stolen the idea from an old Spike Jones recording then later stolen the Glock itself to use in an armed robbery attempt in scenic Passaic. Poor Yop Stahm! The Seven-Eleven counterperson on duty that night in Passaic was a Krav Maga expert who had plucked the Glock from one bony Stahm hand as soon as it was brandished. Next, he chased Yop down the Seven Eleven alley and proceeded to make him swallow each of the sixteen bullets in the cartridge. Yop Stahm was hospitalized then arrested

prefatory to a short stretch in jail. The Glock was impounded and there went the band. Nobody at that time could countenance that contemplative Zen shit when the Theremins' feedback failed. It was the advent of Industrial Noise on the Lower East Side. The biggest band at that time was probably Chinese Steam Clean Laundry. Which was an authentic Chinese Steam Clean Laundry rife with pre-WWII machinery operating at 120 Db given a particular wash cycle.

In all candor, as Victoria Alshenka's taste ran more to Usher and Andy Warhol celebrity silk screens, than a serious grunge artist like Fred Dressup. Most of his output was unknown to her. Merely she was hitting on him. But she hadn't been aware that she was hitting on him. This was quite endearing, actually. As Fred too had no idea he was being hit on. They were star-crossed lovers for the burgeoning age of social media. They were as socially retarded as poop flinging chimps at the Bronx Zoo. They were completely distanced from any deep feeling about other human beings. They were always at a loss to articulate to somebody why they had acted in a specific way. They felt themselves constantly on the verge of turning into something else.

The Wives of the Victims of 9/11, according to Victoria Alshenka, were of a singular faith. The Jews who worked in the WTC had been warned of the attack in advance by Mossad and stayed home.

"Look it up yourself if you don't believe me," she said to Fred. "Look up the names of the victims."

She said this like she had performed the due diligence herself and committed every name to memory. In reality, she was bored with the whole thing. She was merely repeating the calumny that one of her hipster "friends" had told her about while dosing on Halzion. Victoria Alshenka would have liked to have been Jewish because she wanted to be one of those in the know. And for the free parking at major sporting events. But she didn't know how to go about converting officially.

On the diagonal corner of the street, Henry Frog stood with his latest paperback copy of *Growing Up Absurd*. It was purchased an hour before at the Strand Bookstore corner of 12th and St. James Place. "Just to

remind me why I live the way I do," he said to the cashier when completing his purchase. To him there were only five books maximum that existed worth reading (though he hadn't yet created an official list). He had no affinity for art really. A dullard Marxist underneath his threadbare Spiderman PJs, he tended to see art as a bourgeois trick designed to lull the masses into a complacent state. Or something like that. If he ever could find the time to form the sentiment into a cogent thought, he would know exactly. He looked at Victoria and Fred standing there in ostentatious duds chatting each other up and thought them pathetic and vain. He wanted to have his way with the girl, but this was largely out of the question for him, a fat fuck with no game. The banh mi, on the other hand, seemed more than attainable. In another hour, Frog would lead a tour and he would use the gratuities received for one of Joe Troi's sandwiches.

In all candor it took most gastronomes a good twelve hours to experience the full wrath of the Black Dragon Pepper. A nervous type like Fred Dressup, on the contrary, could trigger an adverse reaction in himself in a quarter of the time. Despite his dispassionate exterior he had a fundamentally weak stomach. He was always tempting fate (not to mention underwear hygiene) by wolfing down such spicy fare.

As usual, Fred had ignored the negative input of a viewer regarding one of his creations. He had judged the meeting with his editor a success.

"She's playing hard to get," he told Lafayette's doty seventy-five-year-old receptionist Matilda Gertz of Valery Song on the way out when asked by her how it had all went. Of his editor, Valery, he said, "She doesn't realize that she has no role to play in any of this. The book will be published as is. She doesn't know me yet to be confident enough in all that I have to offer the world."

In Matilda's opinion, more likely, Valery was struggling to find the words to let Fred down easily.

"Nobody around here is successful anymore," she said to him. "They're all waiting around for the end to happen," she said. "They don't know what they're doin', I

don’t think. Or maybe they do but won’t tell anybody about it in advance.”

This reminded Matilda of her days as a secretarial pool typist at the CIA during the late fifties. They too seemed to be making the protocols up as they went along. They seemed like the children of the real executives. The adults had vanished from the premises altogether.

To Matilda, Lafayette Publishing employees only seemed half-versed in their duties. They were not nearly smart enough to think on the fly and make intelligent decisions absent of a governing set of principles. They needed mommy and daddy to hold their hand. But mommy and daddy were flown from the world. So, the business was left to run itself. Despite the org chart’s consideration, nobody in these places could truly be said to be in charge.

Once while working in the confines of the CIA, a deeply strange set of events happened that left Matilda Gertz wondering if those in that Langley office were not only stupid but crazy as well.

“They slipped me a Mickey Finn once,” she said to Fred Dressup who was in all honesty looking to bolt from the premises ASAP. Of late, he had started sweating not an inconsiderable amount and his random pyloric rumblings were loud enough to make a dotty Matilda pause mid-ramble. She was seventy-five years young and had not missed a day of work. Even high on LSD-25, her craven impulse when released from Dr. Gottschalk’s torture chamber was to find her way back to her desk in the office’s enormous front room and resume banging away at her Emerson. She wasn’t sore about being drugged as she assumed it was all for the good of the Republic. Her brainwashing was completed prior to her ever being dosed. The boob tube and her teachers had done the job nicely. Merely her outlook required a light rinse every now and again to maintain appearances.

It was all remarkably interesting to Fred Dressup. He said as much to her prior to darting his eyes around the lobby in search of a public restroom. Such a convenience too at Lafayette had gone the way of Marta Trask’s weekly refreshed half-and-half though for entirely

different reasons. The building didn't want bums from the street using the facilities. So, during a three-week period in 1989 they set about converting the toilets into further office space. Now all the johns in this skyscraper were private, held under lock and key. Gaining access to them was far too much hassle given the only medium level of distress Fred was in. Better to try and locate a shitter off-premises. Or, better yet, hold it in until he got home. He had done better with worse he supposed though he couldn't recall when. More to the point, he didn't want to appear to somebody on Lafayette's staff as a man in need. He was attuned enough to the vagaries of social interaction to realize this was a no no. There was a clause in his book contract that allowed them to take a pass on the project for another four months and compel him to return his advance.

One of the Falling Men captured in his video feed had loosed his bowels on camera. This was to judge by two slightly discolored pixels he had captured somewhere between floors thirty-eight and twenty-seven on the North Tower.

"It's perfectly understandable, the pain you're experiencing right now, the burning and the desire to be released from it, as if your body had been turned against you and you are desperate merely for it to be at an end. A type of animal existence so to speak, where the discomfort has long since stopped being something passively observed. Rather, it consumes completely.

"It now observes you from a close distance," Fred told Matilda Gertz. "And until it's gone you are never again a person who is capable of any sort of emotion greater than calling out for relief."

The shit that Fred Dressup finally took occurred less than two miles from his overstuffed Brooklyn pad. It was surprisingly well-formed, a blackish seventeen-inch eel that briefly seemed (for he had not looked so carefully) capable of independent movement. It seemed possessed of a rudimentary spine which also suggested the presence of a central nervous system somewhere inside of its septic mass providing sense and maybe even a primitive level of consciousness as it twisted in the water. Its appearance into the daylight realms was

merely a prelude for a greater mess to come. But its excision from his body at the very least had returned Fred back to the realm of sanity. All through the long ride over from downtown to this part of Brooklyn he had his legs pressed together, his ass clenched, and was fighting the need to simply squat and do his business on the subway floor. Spying him from the new closed-circuit cameras, Martine Hernandez, this train's conductor had been giving him the evil eye all the way past City Hall.

Acts of public defecation happened semi-routinely on the New York subway system. As of last month, human feces had been re-classified as a biohazard by the retards at the Office of Homeland Security. Red tape, red tape, and more red tape would be in the offing for Martine if Fred should drop a deuce on her watch. He would need his ass beat at minimum, but those days of citizen-sponsored justice in NYC seemed long gone. There hadn't been a single violent altercation on Martine's train for the past four months. Nothing. People just sat there and stared straight ahead. Thinking of better days gone by perhaps. She wasn't the only one who had thought that Giuliani was an unmentioned Biblical Plague taken human form. Everything was better before he came and worse when he left. End of discussion. Of this there was no debate from anybody with a working brain.

Sensing he was being watched by somebody with more authority than the two Japanese tourists out to gawk at the hipster scene in Brooklyn, Fred was able to wrangle his turd long enough to make it out of the next station and scamper down the stairs and into the first open building he beheld somewhere on Canarsie Boulevard. A longtime Brooklynite, nevertheless, this was a block Fred had not yet visited. There was something foreign about it, something byzantine about its architecture that, had he been in a more amenable frame of mind, it would have distracted Fred to the point that he would have attempted an impromptu field study of the place. Presently, however, he was concerned merely about moving his bowels. He reasoned there was a simple explanation for everything. He thought at the time everything else could wait.

The low-flow toilet in the back of the building didn't flush as efficiently as one might have hoped but this hadn't bothered Fred Dressup. At no point had he thought of cleaning up his disgusting mess. He thought his turds beautiful like a bit of art. He was that far up his own ass presently. He couldn't make out where his own fantastic life ended and the visible world began.

"We need to make sure you are prepared for the journey ahead," the same voice Dressup had heard while performing the business of animals had spoken to him from somewhere just off the tiny alcove he had wandered into half-blindly. It was coming from the hallway that he had entered. Which as far as he could see was the only way out of this old building. Hard to say what sort of reaction was expected from him. He assumed at some point he would be compelled to answer whoever it was. It would have been rude not to have at least acknowledged the advice being thrown his way.

The sliding wooden door that he had navigated around to get him inside the loo was keeping him out of sight of the speaker on the other side.

"Think of yourself," the speaker said, "as somebody who was born to give his life for others. You are not near to God when you are only for yourself," the voice said. "You are, whether you admit it or not, God's slave. You are somebody born into service for Allah. You think only of Him and His words," he said. "You are born to give your life for His Cause. To strike at the enemy of faith. You find freedom ultimately in a release from your own concern. All the rest doesn't matter to you. It shouldn't matter. You start to detect the life beyond life and think of everything as shadows on a wall. Nothing is real to you except what is."

This madras had no sign above its archway announcing it as such, nor any type of directory lining its walls announcing where the emergency exits resided.

"The natural fate of all believers is as a sacrifice," the man on the other side of the door said to a wiry thin young man that Fred could make out from where he was crouched, and paused for at least a minute as if to allow his words to sink in. He was driving at something

meaningful. It was meaningful enough that it needed to be alluded to in stages rather than blurted out immediately. He was trying to change the course of the young man's life in some irrevocable way.

Hard to see why this was necessary at this stage in America's decline. But, then again, Fred Dressup was not the intended audience for this hidden imam who sounded youngish and foreign born even though his English was impeccable. He had his own view of America obviously and was eager to share it with any of the madras' students who should bother to ask. Obviously, he was not aware of Fred's presence or else the vaguely conspiratorial tone in his presentation would have vanished completely. This did not by itself suggest that he was in the midst of a conspiratorial pep talk. Nowadays, everybody in New York City was looking over their shoulder, taking their old landline phone apart and inspecting it for bugs. A Muslim teacher in a Brooklyn madras likely had been visited by prevailing authority since 9/11 on at least several occasions. For an instructor with a Wahhabist bent, it was difficult to tell where the political invective ended, and the religious teaching began. It needed to be admitted that for the true Wahhabi cleric there was no distinction to be made. As earthly politics had been rejected utterly and in doing so insurgency adopted as a de facto moral outlook. Everywhere there was sinfulness and depravity, you see. It all had to be burnt to ashes in the end. One was ever Allah's advocate when one had submitted fully to His Will.

This made sense: if you were a preacher bent on recruiting Slaves of Allah to various overseas terrorist cells of which Al Qaeda was only the most noteworthy, recruiting in a relatively open place such as the hallway of this madras seemed an act of utter bravado, empty of cunning entirely.

"Be aware of where your enemies are," was one of the more prescient utterances of the imam unto his student overheard after the second flush. Yet he jabbered on, seemingly ignorant of the new realities regarding civil liberties in America post-9/11. It was overwhelmingly likely that this madras was being

monitored if not wiretapped by multiple law enforcement agencies including the CIA. Hard to say how the imam could be so injudicious, but maybe he actually knew what he was doing. He had not mentioned any particular religious militant group that the young man should consider joining. This was merely a priming of the pump as it were. Eventually there would be a handoff enacted from religious teacher to terrorist recruiter but up until that point all was likely safe within the First Amendment penumbra. Perhaps Fred Dressup with his untutored ears was mishearing the whole goddamned thing. This was just the way they talked at any madras. Maybe it was all a code for something interior and spiritual. When the imam mentioned the enemy of faith for example, he simply meant apostasy. Muslims had all sort of physical militaristic terms for the spiritual life. They were simply trying to preserve a guarantee of salvation in believers inhabiting a country listing to the side of damnation.

This imam was a good man, in other words, albeit one whose medieval rhetoric was in need of refurbishing in order to not unduly alarm all those western eavesdroppers who might be of the opinion that a touch of irony was required when dealing with matters related to jihad.

In the light of such an interpretation, Fred briefly thought sliding the wooden door open and cordially thanking the imam for allowing him to use the facilities. Not that he had expected a friendly bit of repartee afterwards considering he had invited himself in, but it should have at the very least created a bit of momentary confusion that would allow him to beat it out of the front door without having to explain himself.

In an America free of fear there should have been no hesitation on Fred’s part announcing his presence. But given the present political mendacity it was an unwise course.

“The actions you will eventually take on our behalf are not to be judged by earthly measures,” the imam said to the suddenly squirming young man. Hearing that made Fred fearful. There was something weird and dark about this declaration. There was a violent subtext to the sentence.

It could have all been a misunderstanding, of course. But Fred was willing to give his worst fears the benefit of the doubt. In this, he had plenty of company. Too many long nights had been spent in his studio staring at the Falling Men for Fred Dressup to pivot in any other direction. It made too much sense for him to deny that it was happening. He didn't know shit about Islam actually. But that's why it gave him the creeps to the degree that it had.

Back in the tiny bathroom there was an opening to a crawl space that had all but been ignored upon his first appearance. But it was suddenly promising to him as an escape route. Perhaps it led to another room that led to another opening that led to the way out. He had no idea. But, surmising his situation rationally, he would have been a goddamned fool to attempt this bit of urban spelunking. Who knew what monsters lay inside the interior of what appeared to be a nearly century-old structure? Rats, obviously. but who knew what else given the seemingly nefarious purposes the building had been converted to over the past twenty years? If Fred had been in possession of a cellular phone, he would have liked to have made a call. Maybe the cops could be brought in to mediate whatever dispute arose between him and the imam later. Well, this was dreaming. In fact, Dressup didn't own a landline, let alone a cell. He was that kind of guy. He was determined to be the last holdout. Principally all his calls were taken on a pay phone outside a gas station next to his apartment building.

When a man walked into a dark place, the smart move would be to let his eyes adjust to the dim circumstances long enough so that he knew where to place his feet. Somebody like Fred, however, was impulsive enough to not tarry over such an elaborate plan.

The crawl space was surprisingly roomy minus the obvious yet still invisible rat turds he was stepping over and sometimes stepping on. But once he turned a corner he might as well have stepped into a parallel dimension. Best to soldier on slowly as he might. He assumed the way out would reveal itself eventually. He assumed such

crawl spaces had been built with a certain amount of convenience in mind unto the various contractors who made it their workspace.

To judge only by their feel, the pipes overhead were PVC. This suggested a recent modern upgrade in the building's infrastructure. This was interesting to Fred as he would have assumed such a madras would not have been in possession of the funds to pay for the installation of so much as a new PVC joint underneath a sink. Could have been that this work was done in the early nineties when the building had another function altogether or a few years on as an upgrade when the previous owner was trying to sell. The instantiation of a modern plumbing system wouldn't have seemed a supreme priority to a religious organization. Maybe there was some sort of religious aspect to the upgrade that he was missing. The immortal soul is the heart's plumbing, after all. Or maybe it was the other way around. All these vague religious notions might as well have been expressed in Mandarin for all Fred understood or cared. If given the span of a million years, he wouldn't be able to understand the psychological rudiments of religious faith. He simply thought the faithful were crazy. Of late he had stopped pretending to be sympathetic with them. They were speaking a guttural tongue to him when they spoke of God. He found it offensive increasingly and not merely bizarre.

If caught, he supposed his first question would be to ask after the updated state of the madras' plumbing. There needed to be a reason for it precisely in his accounting of the world. Nothing happened in an offhand way as far as he could see. He understood the entire universe as an elaborate contraption. It was entirely apprehend-able through the laws of mechanical engineering.

His own body was a sort of machine to him, absent of any of possessive quality. Unlike so many other mere mortals, he was at an emotional remove from it. Thus, it surprised him greatly when it began to fail and his own pristine, prize intellect not surprisingly (for him) began to fail too.

Wedged as he had been into a space ten inches wide max absent of any bit of constricting infrastructure—a bit of pre-World War II insulation perhaps which was basically a combustible rubber filler, or a vertical two by four—Fred was unaccountably distressed at having to remain in an upright position for hours on end. When he fainted around the three-hour mark of his captivity in the crawl space, he was surprised at the seemingly animate blackness that was nipping at the perimeters of his consciousness. He was completely alienated from his physical form. He didn't understand its needs. His body was being pressed into a rigid position and—as a sufferer of low blood pressure—it felt the need to if ever so briefly recline. When he came to, he had somehow managed to be repositioned on the crawl space floor. Here was a type of miracle given the crawl space's tightness. Maybe in the meantime he had suffered a miniature stroke and had begun to flop around which aided in the repositioning. This, too, was impossible for Fred Dressup to conceive of. He thought absent of his guidance the body was a mass of connective tissue and meat. He didn't think it was capable of moving on its own.

There was light down there. This was owing to the approximately one-centimeter discrepancy between facade and floor in this part of the madras. Fred could see well enough that he decided it was preferable for him to slink around sideways balanced on one shoulder than attempt to stand up and shuffle around like before. He had been moving around in this half-real space for multiple hours. Once meeting a live rat right next to him even he was prepared to admit that he had made a mistake in crawling in here.

By now his original entryway had disappeared. It was subsumed by a shifting structure (at least in Fred's present reckoning of the current dilemma). This was enough to convince Fred that he was trapped in this place for good.

Fred encountered an outward bowing fissure created by wood rot in what he guessed was his fifth hour of captivity. It seemed too good to be true. So much so that he fussed over it for consecutive minutes wondering if it was real.

When he finally made it outside of the madras into a back alley, he tried to reorient his perceptions. Presently it was dark outside. And all that he had feared encountering on the other side of the wall had vanished.

Two elderly men were standing at the alley's mouth bearing an impatient expression. This suggested they knew of Fred's presence all along.

"We heard you in there slinking along," one of these, a Caucasian with white hair long enough to be tied in the back with a braid said to Fred upon his awkward emergence. "For a minute we thought you were a huge monster rat. We thought a new species was about to make itself known to the Greater New York area. Either that," he said, "or here is one of them famous New York sewer gators about to rear its head finally after so much ballyhoo. Forty years in this city and I haven't yet caught a single glimpse myself of such a creature. I almost thought about walking back to my apartment and fetching my gun. Either that or a video cassette recorder. I think they still make those things," he said. "When I'm recording, I'm trying to create a physical object that ensures that something has actually been made different from my own faulty reminiscence of the event," he told Fred. "I don't trust the new devices, the new phones even a little," he said. "I think they're pulling a fast one on the human race with those. There's nothing there to see or examine. You don't know that they're telling the truth. You never know that everything they're supposedly recording could have been documented in advance," the old man, Bill Botev, said, to Fred Dressup. "Of course, this is something an old cuss such as myself would have been expected to say," he told him. "Out of touch with the times. But, then again, you of all people, young man, based on what you've been through, need to be made aware that there is such a thing as accurate perception and real truth. You are different to me than the person you seem to yourself. Nowadays we only need cameras to describe to us how life really is. And when their output can't be trusted anymore, we might as well abandon the human project altogether. We need to think about life the way insects think about it. They're not bothered by such matters as truth or liberty or any of

the rest. But for me (and to a lesser extent for you, I think) there is a process of unlearning that will be required. To think like an insect, it's a monumental task for somebody like me who was read Walt Whitman as a kid. The soul of the common man enters your veins and it's hard to remove it quickly. You mourn over the loss easily for twenty or thirty years before you get the hang of it. And then bug consciousness descends on you and then you're ready suddenly for all that is."

Sitting on the stoop with a presently tongue-tied black man approximately the same age, Bill Botev seemed in absolutely no mood to go anywhere fast at the time. This metal cane at his side gave Fred the impression if only by its present orientation that it served multi-purposes at once. More to the point it was obvious the black man had no affiliation whatsoever with the madras. The sun had set, and it was too late for a delivery run. In another context he would have been made by Fred as a thief. He had some mysterious business at the madras apart from the humble act of educating himself as to the various meanings of God's recitation unto his prophet Muhammad.

At his and his black companion's feet were various parts of electronic equipment that had looked to have been disassembled from its central unit in a rush as if by crowbar.

"We were just about to fan the flame him and I," Bill said to Fred Dressup and pointed to the multitude of one gallon gas cans on the stoop's bottom step. To judge by the smell out here they all seemed mostly full. An arson job then this was. And of a very straightforward variety. Nobody was trying to get away with anything here. This was not being pulled for insurance purposes.

That angle had dried up long ago. Nowadays you threw gasoline into a particular building and struck a match not to get away with anything but rather to send a message to someone. Twenty seconds into talking to Bill Botev, it was clear to Fred that he was not at liberty to say to whom he had wanted the message sent. Of course, a madras such as this with its suspected radical leanings wouldn't be seen as a beacon to most American neighborhoods that it took root in. But this sort of

vigilantism, it seemed to Fred, was almost passé at least in a cosmopolitan place like New York. Picket in front of their building maybe and harass them with anonymous complaints to the cops, but anything more would invite criticism from the same bunch of yahoos in whose defense you were supposedly striking the match to begin with. Arson was too roughhewn, too pre-Civil Rights South a maneuver for even a hardened Islamophobe to be comfortable with. To burn somebody out of existence metaphorically or otherwise, there needed to be a bulwark of plausible denial that one could lean against when the inevitable recriminations were created by a left-leaning media. The arson needed to look like an accident if it was ever to be described as an accident by some spokesperson with illusions of maintaining mainstream cred. Nowadays this was easier said than done as the science of arson investigation had been polished to a gleaming micron-sharp point. Insurance companies had full time molecular chemists on staff who had written their dissertations on the subject of the art of teasing multiple hydrocarbon chains from a single charred piece of nylon fiber. They had model rooms built off campus where every arson scenario could be tested. They had a shared database full of common electrical equipment and its possibilities for emitting sparks. The probabilities for accidental combustion were all exceptionally low you should realize, lithium-ion car batteries excluded. Being in possession of one of these of course was militated against in the insurance rider. In fact, the reimbursement rate was very low for fire damage across the industry. Insurers would always find a sound scientific reason to deny payment if a fire broke out. It was the biggest scam in a scam-rife industry.

Bill Botev seemed, despite his years, his de facto nefarious presence in a Brooklyn alley at night, and his span of missing front teeth, like somebody in the know about such technical matters. Fred assumed he knew what he was doing. Therefore, he assumed that Bill was either pulling Fred’s leg regarding his unstated intentions with the gas or that he wanted to be caught. For example, he and Henry Worthington were simply lounging on the steps with the gas in plain sight. Which

suggested either a greater degree of recklessness than even the most troubled of arsonists was capable of or that he had a different set of intentions. Botev claimed that they had only been waiting for Fred's emergence from the crawl space. He had an interest in him that was puzzling to Fred, because his presence here as far as he knew was a random event initiated by a Vietnamese sandwich that had gotten the better of him on the ride home from downtown.

Things like this happened all the time in a big city. But it was the sophisticated urban dweller who knew enough to act slightly bored while in the presence of a criminal enterprise.

"We have been watching you for some time," Bill Botev told Fred Dressup. He smiled in a way that was likely intended to be reassuring. But, owing to Bill's missing choppers, the smile registered with Fred as a type of aggressive display. Somewhere on his ragged person, somewhere in a particular pocket, in a particular cloth fold, Fred had a card that explained it all. Tyros like Dressup needed to be brought on board in stages. There was a preamble that was always helpful in these situations. After fifty years spent in the conspiracy's maelstrom, such a truth was utterly obvious to Bill. But a newbie like Dressup would be better served being brought along slowly.

Bill didn't want to rock Fred's world unnecessarily here. People learned the truth too quickly and there's something more that occurred with them once they were enlightened. Sometimes they started to weep uncontrollably then curse God and his most favored nation on the planet, the United States of America. See Charlton Heston on his knees in front of broken Lady Liberty at the end of *The Planet of the Apes* for a cinematic analog to this feeling. Some people turned off completely after being briefed. At which point they stopped listening to reason altogether.

Bill Botev needed Fred Dressup to listen to reason if only to get this endless day over with. He had a room nowadays directly across from Coney Island Amusement Park on Brooklyn's mysterious (still to him after all these decades) southern edge. It was a bi-lingual and

occasionally tri-lingual neighborhood, rammed in between Little Odessa and Spanish-speaking Nueva York. Strictly English-speaking, Bill had been trying to fit into the neighborhood for decades. He had friends of all cultures, but he never had found anyone to confide in regarding his cultural alienation in his new city. New York was radically different from Baltimore. But Bill had somehow never found the temerity to leave. Where was home for a man so compromised by circumstance as Bill Botev? Even in the welcoming earth more than likely he would feel like a complete alien, a trespasser, even as he became one with it. This was alienation stretched to a cosmic level. But maybe when it happened, it wouldn't be as bad as that.

In his Brighton Beach room, there was a brass bed and above the brass bed there was an old Red Banner, a gorgeous two by four foot tomato red hammer and sickle special swiped from a Baltimore Union Hall in the spring of 1963. At the time Bill was on the lam from a vengeful Baltimore Crew for grievances already explicated in this narrative. Weird that the Feds had relocated Bill to Brooklyn, New York as a safe spot but they obviously knew what they were doing. Decades on and no relevant mobster had even been casually encountered by Bill. He assumed maybe it had something to do with territoriality. The fear of the Baltimore mob, which he assumed was the Gambino mob, to show their faces north of the Mason-Dixon line was constant. Maybe they had been in cahoots with the CIA all along. Maybe Sid Gottschalk had commanded that they leave Bill alone.

Botev's attachment to the hammer-and-sickle insignia nowadays was entirely ironic. But, somehow, he was mildly desirous to show it to the younger man, if only to provide for him a sense of what once was. That there was idealism in this world once at an utter remove from religious fanaticism. Communism despite its many monstrous flaws was reason-centered and hopeful. When it died the notion of a real paradise on earth died with it. Presently all the paradises were reserved for the afterlife, for the nut jobs that believed in an afterlife. And for a secular organization like the CIA this was proving vexing on many levels. The old rules weren't working

anymore. The Agency's enemies were unpredictable in increasingly unprecedented ways.

The strewn electronic parts, Bill was at pains to tell Dressup, were intended not for electronic surveillance but, according to Bill, as replacement parts for the jihadist robots that they had been experimenting with for the past ten years to co-opt the movement.

"We have the rhetoric down to a science by now," Bill told Fred fishing out the presently de-compartmentalized head of this madras' imam from the span of parts at his feet. Soon he was performing a kind of talking dummy act with the head. This was by manipulating its chin up and down with his fingers. "But somehow we have yet to make an impression in the general culture," he said. "The faithful seem to want more than the words, the mere words," he said. "They want to see a demented look in the preacher's eyes that tells them everything that is being communicated to them is absolutely real. They want something like a mystical experience gained from just listening to the words. It's beyond the reach of even the most advanced roboticists to reproduce," he told Fred. "Supposedly they're working on upgrades in Washington. But don't hold your breath based on the results so far."

The night crew's duty, the reason that they were in the alley presently to begin with was to spark a Muslim counter-reaction once news got around that a Brooklyn madras had been put to the flame.

"Business is slow on the domestic terrorist front," he told Dressup when pried gently for an explanation. "We're trying to drum up business any way we can," he told him. "We have programs that are up for review every year," he said. "The domestic threat is minimal and has been contained. That's not something we can tell our bosses and expect to be rewarded by them. It's not like the old Cold War days where we wrote our own budget. Congress' skeptical of everything nowadays and overburdened. Suddenly we have all these internal rivals like the TSA. They want their own internal investigative unit just like the secret service. They want detainment and interrogation facilities built in every airport. And all

that money is going to be drained out of our black budget."

Of course, the two wars presently on-going didn't help either regarding the ease of being able to build a miniature empire for oneself within the bloated carcass of Washington bureaucracy. So here was a bit of proactive campaigning that could be accomplished by Bill and Henry alone for the price of four gallons of gasoline at the nearby Sunoco ($16.95), the cans themselves, and a pack of matches bought at the local Home Depot with the sawbuck Botev's present day handler, Finn Martin, gave him after a long argument ensued between them about what sort of matches should be bought for the job.

"I am not especially partial to being burnt to death," Bill told Fred holding up the generic pack of matches. This product sported none of the colorful advertising he used to remember existing on match packages. He had in fact met his second wife Nan as a result of one of these matchbook ads in the fall of 1966 when he had contracted a chronic stiff neck as a result of injuries incurred in the line of duty. Nan was a Queens-based chiropractor with a black belt in Wing Chun specializing in Wooden Dummy form. This served Bill greatly in that she cured his stiff neck and imparted implicit knowledge of the Biu Jee in the same imperceptible movement. Presently he was an old timey badass, somebody who had, over the span of decades during his indentured servitude to the CIA, occasion to use his newly acquired deadly skill if only to impress a handler or two when they were grown pushy about things altogether.

Likely the reason the package of matches was devoid of advertising was that its manufacturer wanted to remove their existence from anything remotely social.

"Apart from burning a structure down to the ground," Botev noted unto Fred, "they don't seem to have any real purpose at all. They make you buy a thirty pack out there as if you have a hundred fifty different fires to light in one night," he said. "Mostly you notice that they're an eighth of an inch smaller than they used to be," he said and blamed it on the pervasive anti-smoking campaign which seemed to encourage fingertip burns on the part

of the smoker as a deterrence measure. So, your choices with these twenty-first century matches would be to either light-and-throw or to stick your face right next to whatever gas-soaked fuse you were intending to use to be able to escape. It was thanks, but no thanks, for Bill Botev. Despite the CIA's legendary resources and reputation for the thorough planning, this detail about match length had proven elusive to them. Not that Bill Botev was ever employee of the month material, but this was a deal killer. If his employers wanted to act against him for insubordination let them do so. As Bill was nearly dead by this point anyway. He hadn't consulted a doctor in thirty years, but he assumed he was rife with some form of cancer that would likely drop him in his tracks before the Company had had a chance to do so. Of late they had stopped with the physical threats against him, having sensed perhaps that he was unwell. CIA managers were not known for their sensitivities regarding the health of their agents. Far removed from the threat of imprisonment that they had used to coerce him into compliance in the first place, Bill had used his paid affiliation with the organization as a type of featherbed to ease his way into retirement. His exterminating business had gone kaput as of 1960. He was currently on the Company's payroll as an instigator of dirty tricks. That was OK by him. So long as the tools they provided to do the job were up to the task at hand, he was OK with performing dirty tricks. Because look: these sub-standard matches could hardly have been anticipated by the Company. They were good, but not that good. On the other hand, so much as a singed eyebrow from Bill's perspective would have been an outrage too great to bear.

He assumed his bosses would be understanding about the misfire. He didn't know how high a priority the madras fire held for them. Likely it was simply a safeguard against further budget cuts. They were quite proactive in their staking out of their bureaucratic turf. This was what it had turned into for them. Every cold warrior had basically been purged from the organization by the end of the twentieth century. The CIA didn't believe in anything anymore.

Speaking of an absence of belief, it was becoming increasingly difficult for Botev to pinpoint Fred Dressup's motivations for having wormed his way into the madras' bowels like that in the first place.

"You don't strike us as a religious aspirant," he said to Bill, noting his three-sizes too small black suit, his ironically worn horn-rimmed glasses (vision 20/15 unaided), and his P.F. Flyers whose rubber bottoms had been stained black meticulously by Fred on one rainy day by use of indelible magic marker. "We're not trend followers, Henry and I," Bill said. "But you strike us more than a fly in the ointment type than any, ummmmhh, conformist."

"Hipster," Fred Dressup told Bill when the exact word he was looking for had proved elusive. There were no hippies anymore in New York and barely any politicized punks. The nuclear core of the yellow star of bohemia had long since burned out producing a banal white dwarf. Hipsters were what they called most young people nowadays who were self-consciously cool. They didn't have much in the way of a political let alone religious consciousness. Which made them, even in Fred's dispassionate view, creatures worthy of supreme ridicule to those surmising the current scene.

So generic-looking and intellectually empty were the hipsters, Bill believed them more suitable candidates for CIA robot replacement than some jihad spouting would-be sheik inhabiting some storefront madras.

"Who says they haven't been already?" Bill Botev said to Fred of them being replaced. He wasn't sure if this was the case but he had wanted Fred to know it was possible. He wanted him to know that hipsters too were going the way of the dodo. He wanted him to know that the CIA had these creatures on its radar. He wanted him to know that they thought hipsters ridiculous too.

Bill wanted to light a cigarette. He thought of the consequences immediately to the remnants of his career should he use one of the matches still in his possession and light a cigarette in the confines of a government vehicle. Well, who knew the repercussions for an act like that? Likely smoking in a non-prohibited area would warrant an immediate dismissal if not something worse

altogether. The government was serious as cancer so to speak about smoking rules. They were as serious about non-smoking as they were about turning the light off in your office at quitting time. To judge by the vehemence by which non-smoking regs were enforced at CIA, lighting a fag while on government grounds was the moral equal of child rape. It was something that a case officer wouldn't dare be caught doing especially on company time. On the other hand, a man was only truly free when he was transgressing. In Henry Worthington's breast pocket, there was an open pack of Camels that had lately caught Bill's attention. It wouldn't be long before he was bumming one off Henry. It was just the way he was nowadays. He was sick of the driver's lash. Let them fire him or kill him or attempt a re-education of him or whatever they did to their in-house dissidents nowadays, post-Gottschalk and Dorset. He had long since internalized the reality that he was the walking dead. True or false, he believed it. So, he was free after a fashion. Or at least the leash had been removed and he could now do as he pleased.

Travelling down a road that paralleled the Gowanus Canal in the same Econoline van that they arrived in hours before, Bill Botev found himself in better spirits. He realized that for the first time since first making Sid Gottschalk's acquaintance forty-six years before that he was finally his own man.

"I don't cotton to no tiny matches that burn the fingers," he said to Henry Worthington who was doing the driving (though lord knew where he had learned the skill from). In all the decades Bill had known Henry, he had never seen him full of the need to go anywhere, let alone in a vehicle. He must have acquired the skill while overseas somewhere on one of the clandestine assignments the Company had grown fond of sending him to as a sort of good luck charm. On such occasions they had never asked if he had wanted to go. They usually just bought him a plane ticket and made sure his visa requirements were in order.

Henry Worthington seemed utterly silent within as well as without. Of course, a real human being with desires of his own resided somewhere in Henry. He

couldn’t have remained this stoic the entirety of his life. Deep down he likely was in possession of a high degree of perception and prejudices that, because of his congenital condition and the fact that he had never learned to write, were being left unexpressed. This didn’t mean that they were unreal. Henry Worthington looked at rank strangers like he knew them. Sometimes he stared right through those white benefactors who, regardless of his own wishes, had spirited him from Alabama to Washington and in a perverse frame of mind called him son.

These entities were shadows to him. A comparative stranger such as Fred Dressup, by contrast, was somebody he looked upon lovingly almost as a long-lost Alabama relative newly resurrected from the sharecropping dust of the rural south. Presently in the cargo van’s hold, lured there by Bill’s offer of a ride home, Dressup twisted on the metal floor, his discomfort abetted by this nameless street’s pot-hole-ish makeup and the eight hundred mikes of acid Botev had slipped Fred via a piece of Juicyfruit gum offered in a seemingly guileless way. This was just before the van had backed up in the alley to load up the gas cans and spare parts. This was basic CIA protocol. It had been since the late fifties when through the auspices of Dr. Gottschalk. They didn’t want to leave dust trails behind them was the reason to drug the uncooperative. They thought the easiest way to ensure their anonymity was to dope every witness they could in advance of any damning testimony that they might provide.

Sometimes the acid was offered by field operatives, but sometimes an overriding sense of decency held sway and the protocol was ignored. Fred Dressup meant nothing to Bill, so he offered him the gum. He couldn’t see a downside really in doing so. He couldn’t see that getting a stranger high was an immoral act when so many other objects reinforced an individual’s obliviousness. He couldn’t see what a single dot of acid was so much more heinous than a quart of gin.

Technology, culture, and the nefarious double-dealings of a poorly constrained class of proto fascists had conspired to make a moron of the Common Man.

Nowadays the CIA's main obstacle was simply to blend into the background noise of modern society. Once they had they would encourage a profound detachment from world events. There would be no more Gottschalkian acid doses planned for the juice boxes of kindergarteners. As nowadays such dosing was entirely unnecessary. The popular culture did all the doping all on its own.

From age nine on up the average citizen of the West was in a constantly distracted state. Politicians lied to citizens routinely to accrue alarming amounts of authority. The average citizen was at a loss to gainsay the propaganda. Nothing was so real to him anymore that could not first be rationalized by him as not real enough to give a shit about up until the next (sometimes metaphorical) bong hit was taken. Porn and video games and social media had performed the necessary work of a numbing of consciousness prior to the instantiation of a sort of soft fascism that had once been intended for hallucinogenic substances strictly. Nowadays people didn't feel as coerced and spied upon as they used to feel. The CIA's main mission in this regard was to go with the flow. But they kept on distributing Juicyfruit packs spiked with acid if only as a nod to established procedure. It was like a garage band performing a cover version of "Louie, Louie." It was unspoken tradition that they do so.

"How's it going back there?" Botev asked Fred now zigging back and forth between Queens and Brooklyn on this same mysterious road. Henry Worthington likely knew exactly where he was going but it was anathema for Bill to ask him exactly where. Henry's lifetime of silence had wrapped him in a protective shield that specifically worked against the posing of challenging questions. Henry was a totemic presence, a type of castrated priest for the CIA if only because his humanity was intentionally hidden from view. Racism's ugly legacy. In a more tolerant society, he would have been an ordinary person devoid of priestly imperiousness and the sense that he was gifted with a type of mystical knowledge that kept one from even making eye contact with him when he led you astray.

For forty years once having been summoned from Tuskegee, Henry had lived with his guardian Josiah Dorset in the enormous yellow house just north of Georgetown University. When Dorset died likely of a broken heart after his subsequent public shaming in the 1970s, Henry had lived on in circumstances that were profoundly mysterious to everybody but him. As far as anybody knew he had never been on the CIA's official payroll. Nevertheless, here he was with Bill in the midst of a chemical-aided debriefing. Bill assumed that the plan for the evening was to drive Dressup around for a couple hours until his trip had waned. Eventually he could be compliant enough to take the suggestions offered to him. Suggestions that the CIA was at great odds with radical Islam and there was no synergy therein. This non-sense with the Company robots could be ascribed to a bad trip on Fred's part or some fancifulness on the part of a willful eccentric. He would take them to this Brooklyn madras once it could be relocated and find it entirely empty of any form. There was nothing he could say to make a valid claim for his vision. Somebody would be called into testify to the sight of Fred walking around high on this night and that would be it regarding his ability to prove anything. Botev knew this well in advance of them leaving the scene. Because of such precautions he knew Fred to be of no threat to anybody.

Henry Worthington emitted no opinion at all concerning Fred's presence in the Econoline's hold.

Merely he stared at him benignly. This was his want when encountering a stranger. A stranger never knew what Henry thought of him. This might have indicated a level of disquieting coyness to his bearing. Or it might have meant that he had been brain-damaged by the congenital syphilis that had also kept him from mouthing a single word. He would take this secret to his grave. (Which had already been picked out for him in the Dorset family plot somewhere in Arlington. *Here lies a loyal pickaninny* had been the planned epitaph as of 1949 when Josiah had first reserved the plot for him. But over the span of another twenty years, it had morphed into

something pithier, not to mention politically correct: *il miglior fabbro*.

Whatever resided behind those ancient eyes, Henry Worthington did seem to have an innate sense of direction that tended to argue against the benign idiot perception that for so many years he was associated with if only because of his skin color.

“Where the devil are we?” Botev asked Henry Worthington when an hour later the van came to a halt next to a Brooklyn dock in a place that might have been assumed as Brooklyn but lord really knew presently given the circuitous route they had taken to get here. To Fred Dressup, while viewing the world through kaleidoscope eyes, it might as well have been the surface of Mars. But when the van was put in park Dressup knew enough to try and sit up. He sensed that this was the end of the line. Even through the van’s exterior seagulls could be heard sounding a type of dirge for the dying evening. Water was surrounding them on all sides. There was a sense within him that they had gone as far as they might using this form of transportation.

Once on the docks itself Bill helped himself to one of Henry’s cigarettes. Eventually he announced that he was calling it a night.

“You take care of him. Do whatever you feel is necessary,” he said to Henry. Quickly he swiped the keys from his companion’s shirt pocket.

Turning one’s back on an ambiguous figure like Henry Worthington didn’t seem like such an especially prudent maneuver. This was given the sudden isolation of this place. Bill Botev was beyond caring about his place in this world, however. It was well past midnight by now and he wanted to lay down for the evening. It would be three years, four years tops before he cashed in his chips in this life and he didn’t think it was any big deal if it happened slightly earlier than expected. Nothing interesting was going to occur with him between now and the end anyway. Might as well become accomplished at murder. This was as opposed to the horrible, institutionalized deaths they subjeced the elderly to nowadays almost as punishment for living too

long. He thought there was a certain nobility in being shot in the back by a member of the CIA. At the very least they would be revealed for the monsters they were in the eyes of God. They would be disposing of a decades-long trusted resource in the same way that the mob disposed of a snitch.

In fact, Henry Worthington didn't react any way to Bill's leaving. It was as if he had anticipated that this was what he had wanted to do.

You're Dreaming This Whole Thing.

Here was the speech card he presented to Fred Dressup from out of his coat pocket when it seemed Fred was about to start asking questions. After it was presented to him, Henry held his hand to reclaim it. Apparently, he only had so many of these to go around. He was taciturn even for a mute.

The next card Henry Worthington gave to Fred read, *If the Worst Has Occurred, You're Free*.

Henry started walking toward the end of the non-commercial dock. A motorboat was tied off there, accessible by scampering down a ladder. Eventually Fred Dressup followed Henry Worthington down in want of another place else to go. He didn't trust his legs now. The swarms of blue butterflies were only gathering in number. He didn't have a choice really where he went. He would follow wherever he was led basically. It was another hour or two at most before he could begin to feel self-composed.

A small boat like this was usually bound for the East River. It was used to go somewhere nearby like a water taxi would. This was as opposed to moving beyond the harbor's breakwater into the great ocean beyond.

If Henry Worthington was concerned with Fred Dressup's well-being once they were in motion, he was disguising it well. He had not looked back once since navigating out to the river's west edge. Once the motors were fully engaged, he seemed to have forgotten Fred was even on the boat with him.

"I'm a rather excellent swimmer," Dressup had volunteered unto an uncomprehending Henry as the whine from the boat's twin outboard motors was loud enough to violate the fifty Db noise ordinance

established by the Port Authority for this part of the canal afterhours. Microphones had been set up at half mile intervals supposedly to catch offenders, but in fact these devices had long since been hijacked by the OHS and turned to matters of a secondary submarine detection. You never knew what Al Qaeda was capable of regarding their naval capabilities. This was according to the OHS. Stranger things had been contemplated by this group assuredly even as those in Washington charged with preserving the country's defense had executed effective countermeasures against them. Somewhere off Woods Hole, Massachusetts there was a program on-going to train dolphins as anti-sub weapons. They were using herring injected with a cocaine derivative to assure the animals' compliance. Basic procedure seldom changed. The CIA never trusted others let alone those they had bonded to them through various extra-legal activities and physicalized incentives.

Navigating around the northern edge of Staten Island, Fred had missed the breathtaking vision of the New York skyline off to his right. He was focused on staying alive past sunrise. He assumed this was the same route many Brooklyn-based mobsters took—Red Hook to New Jersey—to dispose of the freshly killed personages in their midst. Dump 'em over there in the swamps where they would be harder to find. He didn't think this was a genius-level bit of criminal planning (though he could have been wrong about the whole damned thing). He had no idea what the mob did with the corpses in their midst. But if he was asked to imagine such an outcome, the outcome they were trending to now would be the one he'd guess was valid.

Once making it over to Arthur Kills Channel, unexpectedly Henry Worthington found the renewed desire to communicate with his passenger.

No Place for a Nervous Person he proclaimed to Fred via one of his laminated cards and let him keep this card. Fred assumed this was because he would be referring to this card constantly over the next few hours and Henry would rather have pointed down at it then have constantly reproduced it for him. There was something in Freshkills Landfill that it was either Henry's mission or

desire to show him. They couldn't go there during the day apparently due to the objects' classified nature. Who knew if they gave tours of the facility anyway? Maybe it was always off limits, so it was just as well to sneak around.

Even in the dead at night when the diurnal birds would be assumed to have been asleep, the seagulls' cry in the dump was striking.

"Now I'm sober finally," Fred said to himself mostly and banished the purple butterflies from inside his irises completely. The fear and the smell of the place and the birds' noise had all teamed to create a temporary antidote to the acid. Having read the bemusement in Botev's eyes, he had only half chewed the Juicyfruit before spitting it out on the other side of an animatronic cranium.

So, Fred was what? Ninety minutes into a two-hour trip? It hadn't been a superhuman-type accomplishment to have swallowed acid and emerged from its grips prematurely. He wasn't claiming for himself a mastery of the mind. Merely he believed himself sober enough to be afraid of what was going to occur once the boat docked.

Henry Worthington was an old man whose physical appearance roused no suspicion that he might constitute a physical threat regardless of how determined he was to make himself into one. Despite this, while viewed in the dark when his frailty was partly masked, he seemed somehow capable of inflicting great harm. It was the silence and more importantly the stillness that he possessed that made him so threatening. He was impossible to read physically. Fred Dressup kept on looking for an outward indication of where his head was at the moment. He was a type of living stone, a children's book unreality forced into life by malign forces that lacked a name or rudimentary self-consciousness. He was an artifact of evil, so to speak. Which didn't make him evil necessarily, but it gave Fred the willies once his peepers were trained on him for more than five seconds. It made Fred consider the way he thought Henry considered him. Fred stared back at his distorted self through Henry and began to wonder after the significance of the act. It didn't make any sense to do so

but in the end that was all there was to be perceived about him. It was a game played absent of Henry Worthington's participation. It didn't mean that Henry Worthington was psychotic. It didn't mean that at all.

In the knapsack that Henry had fished out of the boat's fore there were two industrial grade filtration masks. He intended to use these while inspecting the Freshkills landfill with all its noxious gaseous and spectral emissions.

Don't Miss Your Water Til the Well Runs Dry, Henry Worthington declared to Fred Dressup via a laminated card that might as well have been non-existent given the lack of reading light in the immediate area presently. The mask he was offering up to Fred was easy enough to slip over his face (though lord knew if it was necessary). Of course, the air was foul here but he wouldn't have assumed it toxic at least when inhaled in small doses. Maybe it was Henry Worthington's plan to linger here for days. If this was the case, Fred would have just assumed quit right now. He was up for an adventure just as much as the next guy. But walking in a garbage dump after midnight was less an adventure than an ordeal. Fred was waiting for a payoff from his patience that seemed late in arriving. But at least it was looking like Henry hadn't been meaning to do him in. He had a thin smile on his face that suggested he was enjoying himself. And he didn't seem to be in possession of a weapon.

This part of the landfill had a terrain mimicking a series of berms of the sort one encountered in western Nebraska. With Henry mimicking that he should watch his step, Fred Dressup carefully followed the path that had been scouted by Henry in advance. That led into Freshkills' toxic heart.

Don't Miss Your Water Til the Well Runs Dry, Henry Worthington told Fred Dressup once more and held up the flashlight he had suddenly turned on that had been stored next to the masks. What was illuminated was the most pulverized dilapidated remains of the old World Trade Center that had over the course of three years been scooped up into massive trucks and driven across the Verrazano Narrows Bridge for ultimate deposit in this berm. Some of the concrete slabs were big as Zero Point

refrigerators but most were the size of golf balls having been reduced to the size by the pressure they had been subjected to during the collapse. Along with the building's exterior so many of the objects belonging to the towers' residents had been scooped up in the removal project indiscriminately. So many mementos of a bland existence in a cubicle office space now were converted by circumstance into arresting mementos mori—broken picture frames and a plastic mug emblazoned with the sobriquet World's Greatest Dad in a dayglo ink that Fred was able to read even in the dark. Perhaps this was what Henry Worthington had intended to show off to Fred Dressup. He thought it quaint maybe. But perhaps he had a more significant point in mind altogether.

Dog is God Spelled Backwards, Henry counseled Fred Dressup when a little inquisition was attempted through his breathing apparatus. Fred didn't feel that he needed the mask. He was wearing it temporarily in deference to Henry's wishes. Feeling himself more fully in touch with his body and relatively safe from harm he decided that soon he wouldn't show such respect for Henry and his eccentricities. He wanted to see what there was to see and get the hell out of there at the proper time. This was a haunted place they were in. It was filled with pitfalls spiritual and physical. Contrary to Henry's wishes he thought it best not to linger in such an area.

The dump trucks had loaded everything into Freshkills from Ground Zero apparently. This included some of the parts of Flight 11 that had descended in a roughly vertical fashion after having been liberated from its fuselage upon impact and the fireball that followed.

"I might want to take this as a souvenir," Fred Dressup told Henry Worthington when one berm over a melted airline tray table was spied. There was something about its shape that intrigued him, something asymmetrical and random about the shadow it cast that hinted at the violence it had encountered on its way to the earth. Its plastic was warped in several places so that it resembled only something a modern sculptor would contemplate, less a practical minded engineer. It was useless, in other words. But it provided powerful

testimony concerning humanity's true nature. The tray table was something a dark artist type might want to be in possession of. But that was it. Fred was going to leave and pick it up later but who knew if they would be back this way? Henry seemed to have a particular destination in mind for them deep within the crap topography. Maybe he had another way out in mind. Likely there had been dozens of these bits of broken aeronautics scattered around enough so that they would be easy pickings come first daylight. This was not what they had come here to see. These parts were bits of ephemera. They were a single piece of a wholly larger puzzle.

Venturing another hundred yards down the self-created path they were on took them to the remains of the old Willowbrook State School where Gamma Globulin experiments had been carried out on mentally retarded students without consent for decades. The place was closed in the late eighties and eventually shipped here in pieces when complaints of ghostly visions of wronged ex-students became too prominent in the surrounding neighborhood to ignore. Presently Henry's flashlight was trained on a stainless-steel hydrotherapy unit that had been ripped from its moorings when the facility's destruction was in full swing. The school by that point was the shame of Staten Island. So much so that they didn't think of preserving its implements for the historical record. But this might have been the only free-standing hydrotherapy unit left in the country. It must have weighed two hundred pounds and would have taken a flatbed truck to transport it from its current resting place hard against a pile of psychiatric textbooks from the 1950s with names like *Cognitive Disorders and Race* and the immortal classic *Sterilization and Society*.

Nothing Beats the Good Time Feeling Henry Worthington told Fred Dressup of Mom's Apple Pie.

There was so much garbage here of the recent and yet buried past. It was a shame that it was all eventually bound for recycling rather reclaiming by an historical-minded artist such as Fred Dressup.

"You brought me here on a fact-finding expedition and I'm grateful for it," Fred Dressup said to his suddenly new friend Henry Worthington and grabbed the large

trowel that a suddenly flagging Henry had been dragging behind as if some sort of vestigial tail. For him it had been an extraordinarily long day. He was usually in bed by ten pm. He was animated by some unseen purpose beyond rummaging around an enormous junkyard in the middle of the night. He had a conscience (or maybe some sort of approximation therein). He thought this was important work that they were in the midst of. Indeed, with Henry Worthington one could never say for sure. He never broadcast an intention to his actions if he could help it. He assumed there was no advantage in letting someone else know what you were about to do.

He seemed to know the exact spot where he wanted to dig. Which was near Freshkills' abstract center point.

Rather than produce a pithy card this time, upon arriving what Henry Worthington did to communicate his desire to Fred was open his mouth as wide as he could. Then he shone his flashlight up.

On the roof of his mouth was a half dollar-sized hole that opened into his sinus cavity. He was trying to communicate a state of being unto Fred. Something beyond words. Which was good because there was no words forthcoming from that mouth any time soon.

His further actions would be dictated by Fred. He had picked out Fred from so many because he assumed he had had the capability of doing the right thing.

Good things comes unto those who wait. But bad things come unto those who wait too long.

It was right around daybreak where the CIA's treasure-trove of recordings was uncovered along with Dr. Sidney Gottschalk's recently discarded collection of homemade masks.

"Try it on, try it on," Henry Worthington said to him though such an utterance required this narrative's translation. The mask in Fred's hands at the moment was paper thin, made of circular cloth. It was a starter mask for the Ku Klux Klan. He held it up to the east and viewed the sunrise through its sockets. And then he put it in his pocket and never thought of it again. It was still with him. To him it felt like a second skin.

About the Author

N.A. Hole is the author of *Little Ethiopia*, *Death Trip*, *Gut Bucket Blues, and Busy Bee*. This is his twelfth novel.